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FRANÇOIS DE SALIGNAC DE LA MOTHE FÉNÉLON. *Frontispiece.*

From a steel engraving.

Portraits
of the
Seventeenth Century
Historic and Literary

By
C. A. Sainte-Beuve

Translated by
Katharine P. Wormeley



History of the French Academy — Corneille — Mademoiselle de
Scudéry — Molière — La Fontaine — Pascal — Madame de Sé-
vigné — Bossuet — Boileau — Racine — Madame de Caylus —
Fénelon — Comte Antoine Hamilton — The Princesse des Ursins

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I.

History of the French Academy.

I.

History of the French Academy.

THE short history that M. Pellisson has given of the beginning of this Association, in the form of a "Letter to a Friend," is in reality one of the most finished and most agreeable essays in our language, a rare and perfect example, that shows better than all definitions what it is to write with elegance and purity in French. There are, and there were in the days of Pellisson, two sorts of elegance and urbanity in conversing and in writing: one lively, more natural, easier, more familiar, also more coloured; derived from commerce with the great world and the Court by those who were born and bred to them from infancy, that, for instance, of Saint Évremond, Bussy, Clérembault, La Rochefoucauld, Retz:—the other more studied, formed in the library and by reading, or by assiduous attendance in certain brilliant circles, and by intercourse with the best-qualified literary personages; this last form of urbanity is that of Conrart and Vaugelas; in it Pellisson excels, and is, above all others, the perfect model of his time.

If, after reading some natural and living work of that period, the *Memoirs of Cardinal de Retz* for example,

Pellisson is immediately taken up, what I mean to say will be understood. We have to do with an excellent writer in him, but a writer of another species, of a wholly different stamp, of another origin and genus. He is not of those who, like Retz, have seen all and essayed all in action, and, daring all, risk saying all, making to themselves a language in their own likeness, which they alone can speak with a certain air, well assured as they are of being always of a good school and a good race. Pellisson is one of those authors by profession who, having begun by the pen, never lose it from sight, and would prefer to cut themselves short, like Fontanes, of ideas or incidents to relate, if they thought they could not gather and present them with absolute correctness and perfect elegance.

Born at Béziers in 1624, of a Protestant family very distinguished in the law, he was educated in the South, and was twenty-six years of age when he came to Paris, where he was introduced into the literary world under the auspices of Conrart. It was then that he composed, under the form of a "Letter to a Friend," this Narrative, or History of the French Academy, which he was admitted to read before it in full assemblage. The approbation the paper won was so great that the first vacant place in the Association was voted to Pellisson, and, meanwhile, he was allowed to be present at the meetings in the capacity of "supernumerary"; which has never happened ex-

cept to him. He thus found himself the object of a unique exception; he was the only man of letters to whom the Academy did not fear to make a promise in advance.

He was thus placed under the very best conditions to write this narrative; beside the Academy but not as yet of it, and in the confidence of the best-informed witnesses. It is thanks to him that we are able to know the Golden Age, the Evander age, of this much-lauded Association, which was soon to have its Louvre and its Capitol.

During the first half of the seventeenth century numerous efforts were made in France for the culture and perfecting of the language, natural and spontaneous efforts of little societies, or coteries, grammatical and literary. After the coming of Malherbe a general impulse in this direction was felt. One of these little societies, that of MM. Conrart, Godeau, de Gombauld, de Malleville, de Serisay, de Cerisy, Habert (Chapelain came a little later), assembled weekly at Conrart's, whose lodging was the most central. They read to one another the works they composed; these they criticised or encouraged. "The conferences were followed sometimes by a promenade, sometimes by a collation." During three or four years the meetings continued thus in perfect obscurity and freedom.

"When they talk to-day of that first period of the Academy," says Pellisson, "they speak of it as a Golden Age during which, in all the innocence and freedom of the first centuries, without noise or pomp,

without other laws than those of friendship, they enjoyed together all that association of minds and reasonable living can give that is sweetest and most charming."

Secrecy was pledged and kept: *Qui sapit in tacito gaudeat ille sinu*. One of them (M. de Malleville) was the first to infringe it; he spoke rather indiscreetly of the conferences and of what was there discussed to Faret, author of the *Honnête Homme*, who brought his book to him, then just printed. Faret talked to others. Des Maretz and Boisrobert were informed of the meetings, and asked to be admitted. The members could not refuse Boisrobert, a great favourite of Cardinal Richelieu and his chief amuser. As the latter well knew that rather jovial tales and literary news were most likely to amuse his patron, he did not fail to entertain him with the proceedings of the little company; and gave him so favourable an idea of it, that Richelieu conceived a scheme to adopt the association and constitute it into a formal body, for use as the literary decoration of the reign.

For Richelieu (let us in our turn and after so many others, do him this homage), had in him that flame, that religion of Letters which Pericles, the Augustuses, and the Mæcenases had in their day to so high a degree; he believed that truly noble and great things would not continue to be regarded as such for ever, except in so far as they were consecrated by that religion; and that the genius of Letters is the neces-

sary and indirectly auxiliary ornament, the magnificent and most honourable decoration of the genius of States. If he had less taste than the great men of Greece and Rome whom I have just cited, that came of the hindrances of his epoch, of his education, and of a vice of his mind which was given to a species of pedantry; but though he transgressed in the minor detail he was not mistaken in his public view of literature, nor in the value of the institution he sought to establish for the service and pleasure of all.

After having subdued and decapitated the nobles, checkmated the Protestants as a party in the State, foiled and humbled the factions in the royal family; after making head throughout all Europe against the House of Austria, counteracting its prominence by several armies in the field and on the sea, he had the intelligence to comprehend that there was something to do for the French language, to polish, adorn, authorise it, render it "the most perfect of modern languages," transport into it that empire, that universal ascendancy once possessed by the Latin language, and which, since then, other languages had seemed to usurp transiently, rather than actually possess. The Spanish language at that time was usurping this semblance of authority; so that even on that ground he would still combat the House of Austria. But for the execution of such an idea he needed choice auxiliaries; a happy chance threw them, already collected, in his way. He stretched forth his hand and said to that

little gathering which thought itself so obscure: "I adopt you; belong to me, belong to the State!"

On the other side, it is piquant and almost touching to see how this offer of protection and aggrandisement alarmed, at first, those worthy men, sincere lovers of private life and studious leisure; they were strongly tempted to decline so great an honour. But the wise and prudent Chapelain remarked that inasmuch as, unfortunately, their conferences had come to light, they no longer had liberty of choice; that this honourable offer of protection, coming from such a height, was an order; and to withdraw from the good intentions of the Cardinal would be to incur his enmity: *Spretæque injuria formæ*. The reasons presented on this occasion, and those produced in other and private discussions are given by Pellisson in little indirect discourses imitated from those of Livy, and not less suitable. The Cardinal was therefore thanked, surprise and gratitude mingling in the reply, and the little company placed itself at his disposition. This took place early in 1634.

It is unfortunate that the history of the Academy has not been continued on the plan and in the detail of Pellisson. That history, as I conceive it, is now rather difficult to write, for want of sufficient private documents; nevertheless, I do not think it impossible. I speak, of course of the old Academy, destroyed in 1793; as to the new Academy, documents and recollections abound. The important point would be

to mark carefully the different periods, the different ages, and the various influences which the Association has undergone or has exercised, the currents of mind that have reigned within it, and through which it has found itself more or less in harmony and in communication with the tone and opinion of the outside.

It has proved an almost general rule that the Academy, after a period when it was completely on the level of exterior literary opinion, and represented the aspects most in view and most flourishing, has lowered its level or retarded its progress. This came of the duration and longevity of its members. For example, under Richelieu and from its origin, it was composed, naturally, of all that was best and most highly considered among men of letters, Balzac at their head, and Chapelain. But, by the very fact that Chapelain lived on and survived himself, there came a moment under Louis XIV, and at the finest period of his reign, when we note in the breast of the Academy a slightly old-fashioned and behind-the-age spirit. Not only were Molière and La Fontaine not of it, but Boileau was not, until Louis XIV, having asked him a question on the subject, heard with amazement of his absence.

For the very reason that the school of Chapelain and Des Marets lived out its course of nature and prolonged itself by its choice of successors, Boileau was never completely at home in the Academy; he was never satisfied with it, and could not speak

of it without an epigram ; he was almost of the opinion of Mme. de Maintenon, who was reproached for not regarding it as “a serious body.” The fact is, the old academicians, against whom Boileau in the beginning had contended, lived long enough to admit much younger academicians who, from the start, were opposed in their turn to Boileau, already old and mature. I know, of course, that there were grand classic days, when Racine solemnly eulogised Corneille, when La Bruyère was received ; but the ordinary routine of the Academy was the reading of a poem by Perrault, a dissertation by Charpentier, an idyll by Fontenelle, and, after a while, a fable or a translation in verse by La Motte. The latter, as soon as he belonged to the Academy, became, by his assiduity, his politeness, his amiable, social spirit, one of the most essential members, and the dearest to the heart of the company. Through him, and through Fontenelle, the Academy found itself once more well in advance, and at the head of all literary questions under the Regency.

But after that, and until the middle of the eighteenth century, time and effort were needed to raise the Academy from the selections made under the stagnating influence of Cardinal Fleury, and to bring it once more into harmony and true alliance with the literary and philosophical powers active in the world. Voltaire did not belong to the Academy until 1646, that is, very late, like Boileau ; but once in it, though

absent and living out of the country, he ruled and governed it, which Boileau never did. Duclos first, and then d'Alembert were his chief prime-ministers.

M. Paul Mesnard, in a "History of the Academy," (which has no other fault than that of being too much abridged), has sketched these epochs and these interior divisions very well. He indicates a chapter that ought to be written about the influence of women on the elections to the Academy—Mme. de Lambert, Mme. de Tencin, Mme. Geoffrin, Mlle. de Lespinasse, etc.—there is another that ought also to be written, on the imperceptible directing influences of the perpetual secretaries. A good perpetual secretary, without making much stir in its interior, gives motion to the machine and enables it to go as if of itself. We still have some of that kind; and we notice very quickly when, by chance, they are absent or lacking. The saddest period of the Academy in the eighteenth century was that of the insignificant perpetual secretaries Dacier, Du Bois, Houtteville, Mirabaud. In their day the company slumbered or drifted.

In spite of the brilliant rôle that the Academy was able to play in the second half of the eighteenth century, which made it a sovereign organ of opinion, especially about the time of the accession of Louis XVI until 1788, I do not think that it has ever, altogether and at all points, fulfilled the hope of its founder, Richelieu; it has done both more and less than he desired. Let me explain:

It is not on the Letters Patent of his institution that I lay the blame; and besides, I do not assume to lay any blame at all, but merely to state facts accurately and draw conclusions. The Letters Patent of 1635 and the project which preceded them explained, in very clear terms, the name of the studies and the object of the work of the Academy, namely:

“The hope that our language, more perfect already than any other living language, may succeed to Latin, as Latin did to Greek, if more care be taken than has been hitherto of *elocution*; which is not, in truth, the whole of eloquence, but a very good and very important part of it”; and, for that object, it was necessary “to establish certain rules, and, primarily, to establish a certain usage of words, and to regulate terms and phrases by an ample Dictionary and a precise Grammar, which would give to the language a part of the ornaments that it lacked, so that later it might acquire the rest through a *Rhétorique* and a *Poétique*, that should be composed to serve as regulators to those who wished to write in verse or prose: that, in this way, the French language might be rendered not only elegant, but capable of treating of all Arts and Sciences, beginning with that most noble of all the arts, eloquence,” etc., etc.

Of all this and of the other articles of its first programme, the Academy accomplished nothing but its Dictionary. Add to that, if you like, Vaugelas's *Rémarques* which the Academy publicly adopted, and perhaps also the French grammar of Regnier Desmarais, its perpetual secretary, who made it semi-officially. This was enough, rightly viewed; and in that direction the Academy has done, in course of time, what it was commissioned to do. As for the *Rhétorique* and the *Poétique*, it prudently confined

itself to the Letter of Fénelon, which it could show to friends and enemies as a charming series of questions and projects, every one being allowed to build and dream as he chose on the engaging words of the least dogmatic of masters.

But Richelieu meant that his French Academy should be something more; he meant to make it the judge of all the noted works that appeared; to constitute it a grand jury, as we say now, a high literary tribunal, expected to give its judgment on all the important current productions that came before the public. I imagine to myself a living and ever-present Richelieu: he would ask the Academy its opinion on *Phèdre* for example, on *Athalie* the morning after the first representation of those famous plays, in the very quick of the discussions they excited. He would ask the same on all the great poetic works that led to schism and controversy (I am supposing a permanent and immortal Richelieu); he would, in short, exact that learned men should speak out; not waiting for the verdict of time, but forestalling it, regulating it to some extent, and giving their reasons; leading the tide of public opinion and not following it. Was this possible? was it desirable? That is another question, and when I say that the Academy in this has not fulfilled its vocation and has not acted in the direction indicated by its founder, I am not blaming it. No one does things of that sort unless they are not only authorised but forced and constrained to do them.

No one plunges, from mere gaiety of heart, into the *mêlée* of contemporaneous discussions, even if he flatters himself he can rule them. Men are not so ready to confer upon themselves such extraordinary commissions, always thorny, and which look like usurpation, if they are not imposed as a duty. I shall merely remark in defence of Richelieu's idea (of which there are others to tell the objections and difficulties), that it was a truly French idea in the mind of the great minister, like all the many others that came to him in the course of his glorious patriotic tyranny.

For in France—note this well—we are not, above all, desirous of being amused or pleased by a work of art or intellect, nor even of being touched by it; we want to know if we are right in applauding and in being amused and touched. We fear to be compromised, to make ourselves ridiculous; we turn about, we question our neighbour; we like to meet an authority, to find some one, man or Association, before whom we can lay our doubts. In this is a double process of the French mind. It has impulse, ardour, a dashing spirit, but criticism is close beside it, rules and regulations are felt on the morrow of what has seemed rashness. I therefore suppose that the Academy, which began by giving its judgment rather pertinently on the “*Cid*,” might have kept fairly well to its opening promise if it had found itself obliged to do so. Let us suppose a judgment, with reasons assigned, pronounced by the Academy within six months on

every leading work in literature; which judgment (due allowance being made for difference of periods and customs) should not be inferior for sound sense, impartiality, and moderation to that early verdict on the "Cid." Such judgments would to-day form a very memorable series, and a critical jurisprudence, so to call it, that would certainly not be without its action on the vicissitudes and variations of the public taste. But I perceive that this view presupposes and demands a series, or at least a frequent recurrence of Richelieus historically impossible.

In all this, I have only tried to make it felt in a rather salient way, what the great founder intended on this point. The Academy, I repeat, has done less and has done more than he expected of it; and, on the whole, if he could reappear on one of our fête-days, he would not blush too much for his creation; he might grumble a little, but he would also quiver with fatherly pride at the sight of his emancipated offspring.

Since I am on the subject of the Academy, one of the most national subjects in France, and about which everybody talks, I ask to be allowed to recall a few facts, and make a few observations without much connection as they occur to me.

People always speak of the academic *fauteuils* (arm-chairs). Originally, and when the Academy held its sessions at the Louvre, there were but three, for the officers of the company, the director, chancellor,

and perpetual secretary. It was on the election of La Monnoye (December, 1713) that this feature was changed. La Monnoye was a man of letters, witty, educated, commonplace as to talent, but universally liked and esteemed in person; a laureate grown grey in competitions, one of those happy medio-critics that make a desirable candidate; he was unanimously received; Louis XIV, whom he had celebrated many a time in verse, showing special satisfaction. La Monnoye, writing to a friend, relates his reception by the Academy as follows :

“ There is no example of an Academician received with greater distinction. I am careful not to attribute this to my own merit, which is slight; it is due solely to the influence of Cardinal d’Estrées and his nephew. . . . Something quite memorable happened at the Academy on this occasion. None but the three officers of the Company had *fauteuils*; the cardinals who were not allowed any unless they were one of the officers, refused in consequence to be present at the sessions. The embarrassment of Cardinal d’Estrées was great, he being unable to give me his vote without going in person to the Academy; but this he could not resolve to do on account of not having a *fauteuil*. The two other cardinals who were members of the Academy, Cardinal de Rohan and Cardinal de Polignac, having conferred with him, laid the matter before the King, who ended the difficulty by ordering that henceforth all the Academicians should have *fauteuils*.”

Such is the authentic history of the academical arm-chairs. Now those forty *fauteuils* of the old Academy were not transmitted to the new. To satisfy inquisitive persons and those who want to know by the card what is real in a metaphor, I will state that at our sessions there are no *fauteuils* only comfortable seats.

Sometimes a list of academicians is given by *fauteuils*; on the election of each new member it is customary to say that he occupies the *fauteuil* of such and such illustrious men, going back to the origin of the Academy. All that is chimerical. The old Academy having been suppressed in 1793, its affairs became muddled and confused. Later, when the Institute was created, and in the bosom of that Institute a class that corresponded fairly well to the original French Academy was formed, there was no direct relation established from one to the other; those of the old academicians who were appointed were so under new rights, and not as a recovery of possession. The genealogy of the *fauteuils* coming down to our day, which was invented some thirty [now eighty] years ago, by a certain professor of history, who thought it had a good effect in a synoptical table, is as false as most genealogies. Nevertheless, the public believes in it and, in spite of what I say, will probably continue to believe in it.

The Dictionary of the French Academy, not that in common use, which is already in the hands of every one, and which will suffice awhile longer until newly revised, but an *historical* Dictionary, begun about fifteen years ago—an important addition very complete, very rich in citations, and very interesting to read (a rare thing in a dictionary)—is about to appear with a preface by the learned editor, M. Patin; this first addition, important as it is, is only preliminary,

and will be presented in a few days to the Minister of Public Instruction. On this side the Academy shows itself faithful in extending rather than limiting its first mission.¹

What is a classic?—a delicate question to which divers answers might be given according to ages and seasons. A man of intellect put it to me to-day, and I will try, if not to solve it, at least to examine and sift it before my readers, to induce them to answer it themselves, and throw light, if I can, on their idea and mine. Why not, from time to time, risk treating critically subjects that are not personal, which concern, not some one, but some thing; subjects of which our neighbours, the English, have succeeded so well in making a whole category under the modest title of Essays. It is true that to treat such subjects, which are always a little abstract and moral, we need to speak in tranquillity, to be sure of one's own attention and that of others, to seize, in short, one of those half-hours of silence, moderation, and leisure that are so rarely accorded to our lively France, whose

¹ Since the above was written (1859), M. Émile Littré, of the French Academy, was charged with the duty of revising and enlarging the original Dictionary, until now it stands as a great monument to the French language in many volumes. An historical, biographical, geographical, mythological section has been added by M. Beaujean, inspector of the French Academy, and the collaborator of M. Littré. An abridged edition of the whole, in one small volume, has been published, under the sanction of the Minister of Public Instruction, by Hachette et Cie., which is quite invaluable for daily and constant use.—TR.

genius is impatient of them, even when she tries to be wise and to make no more revolutions.

A classic, according to the ordinary definition, is an ancient author, already consecrated by admiration, and an authority in his own class. The word *classic*, used in this sense, first appears among the Romans. They termed *classici* not all citizens of diverse classes, but those of the first class only, who had a revenue of, at least, a certain specified sum. All who possessed an inferior revenue came under the denomination of *infra classem*, beneath the class *par excellence*. Figuratively, the word *classicus* is used in Aulus Gellius, and applied to writers: a writer of value and note, *classicus assiduusque scriptor*, a writer of account, who has property, and is not to be confounded with the crowd of proletaries. Such an expression supposes an age advanced enough to have something like a census and classification of literature.

As for moderns: in the beginning, the true and only classics were, naturally, the ancients. The Greeks, who, by singular good fortune and an easy buoyancy of mind, had no other classics than themselves, were, at first, the only classics of the Romans, who took pains and strove to imitate them. The Romans, after the noble ages of their literature, after Cicero and Virgil, had classics of their own, which became, almost exclusively, those of the succeeding centuries. The Middle Ages, which were not as ignorant of Latin antiquity as was thought, but which

lacked both judgment and taste, confounded ranks and orders: Ovid was treated on a better footing than Homer; Boetius was thought a classic equal, at the least, to Plato. The renascence of Letters, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, cast light into this long confusion, and then at last admirations were graduated. The true and classic authors of the double antiquity were henceforth detached upon a luminous background, and grouped themselves harmoniously on their respective heights.

Meantime, the modern literatures were born, and a few of the most precocious, the Italian for instance, had already an antiquity of their own. Dante had appeared; and posterity had early saluted him as a classic. Italian poesy may since have dwindled, but when it chooses it can recover and preserve the impulsion and the echo of that high origin. It is no indifferent thing for a poesy to have such a point of departure, a classic source in such high regions, and to come down from a Dante rather than issue lamely from a Malherbe.

Modern Italy had its classics and Spain had every right to feel that she had hers, while France was still without them. A few writers of talent gifted with originality and exceptional warmth of fancy, a few brilliant efforts, isolated and without sequence, immediately broken off and needing ever to be renewed, did not suffice to endow our nation with the solid and imposing foundation of literary wealth. The idea

of a *classic* implies, in itself, something that has sequence and consistency, which makes a traditional whole, which creates itself, transmits itself, and lasts. It was not until after the great years of Louis XIV that the French nation felt, with a quiver of pride, that such happiness had come to her. All voices told it then to Louis XIV with flattery, with exaggeration and emphasis, and yet with a certain assured feeling of its truth. A singular and piquant contradiction then appeared: the men who were most enchanted by the marvels of this age of Louis the Great, and who even sacrificed the ancients to the moderns, these men, of whom Perrault was the leader, brought about the exaltation and consecration of the very ones who were their most ardent adversaries and opponents. Boileau avenged and angrily maintained the ancients against Perrault, who extolled the moderns, that is to say: Corneille, Molière, Pascal, and the eminent men of his day, including among the first of them Boileau himself. The kind La Fontaine, taking part in the quarrel on behalf of the learned Huet, did not perceive that he himself, in spite of his careless habits, was about to wake up and find himself a classic.

The best definition is example: as soon as France possessed its Louis the Fourteenth century, and could consider it from a little distance, she knew what a classic was, better than any statements could tell her. The eighteenth century added to this idea by noble

works due to its four great men. Read the "Age of Louis XIV" by Voltaire, the "Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans" by Montesquieu, the "Epochs of Nature" by Buffon, the "Savoyard Vicar," and certain fine pages of revery and description of nature by Jean-Jacques, and say if the eighteenth century did not, in those memorable works, combine tradition with freedom of development and independence. But at the beginning of the last century (the nineteenth) and under the Empire, in presence of the first attempts of a literature decidedly novel and rather adventurous, the idea of the classic shrank and narrowed strangely in certain resisting minds, more grieved than severe. The first Dictionary of the Academy (1694) defined a classic author simply as "an ancient author much approved, who has authority in the matter of which he treats." The Dictionary of the Academy of 1835 takes that same definition and makes it, from being rather vague as it was, precise and even narrow. It defines classic authors as those "who have become *models* in any language"; and in the articles that follow, the expressions, "model" — "rules established for the composition of style" — "strict rules of the art to which writers must conform," recur continually. This definition of the *classic* was evidently made by the respectable Academicians, our predecessors, in presence and in view of what was then called the *romantic*, that is to say, in view of the enemy. It is time, I think, to re-

nounce such restrictive and timid definitions, and to enlarge our minds.

A true classic, as I should like to hear it defined, is an author who has enriched the human mind, who has really augmented its treasury, who has caused it to take a step in advance, who has discovered some moral truth that is not equivocal, or some eternal passion in the heart where all seemed known and explored; who has rendered his thought, observation, or invention under any form, no matter what if it be broad and grand, refined and rational, healthful and beautiful in itself; who speaks to all in a style of his own, which is felt to be that for all the world, a new style without neologisms, new yet ancient, easily contemporaneous with all epochs.

Such a classic may be for a moment revolutionary; or rather, he may seem so at first, though he is not so; he has never violently attacked that which was around him, he has overthrown that which hindered him only to re-establish, as soon as possible, the equilibrium to the profit of the orderly and the beautiful.

My readers can put, if they like, many names under this definition, which I have tried to make grandiose and plastic, or, to express it better, open and generous. I should put there, in the first instance, Corneille, the Corneille of *Polyeucte*, *Cinna*, and *Horace*. I should put Molière, the most complete, the fullest poetical genius we have had in France.

"Molière is so great," said Goethe, that king of critics, "that he astounds us each time that we read him. He is a man apart; his comedies touch the tragic, and no one has the courage to try to imitate them. . . . In a play for the stage each action must be important in itself, and lead up to an action more important still. Tartuffe is, in this respect, a model . . . it is all that there is of finest. Every year I read a play of Molière, just as, from time to time, I contemplate some engraving from the great Italian masters."

I do not conceal from myself that the definition I have just given of the classic is rather outside of the idea that usually accompanies that title. Conditions as to regularity, wisdom, moderation, reason, dominating and controlling all else, prevail in that idea. In this sense the classics *par excellence* must be writers of the second order; correct, intelligent, elegant, always clear and precise; of noble passion still, but its force slightly veiled. The characteristic of this theory, which subordinates imagination and sensibility to reason (of which Scaliger gave perhaps the first signal among moderns), was, properly speaking, that of the Latin theory, and it long remained the preference of the French theory. It has truth, if used only in the right way, and provided that word *reason* is not abused. It is evident, however, that it is abused, and that if reason is to be confounded with poetic genius, and to make one with it in a moral homily, it cannot be the same thing as that genius so varied, so diversely creative in its expression of passions in the drama or the epic. Where will you find reason in the fourth book of the *Æneid* and in the transports of

Dido? Where will you find it in the madness of Phédre? The spirit that dictated that theory leads to putting in the first rank writers who control their imagination, rather than those who yield themselves up to it; who put Virgil before Homer, Racine before Corneille. The masterpiece that this theory loves to quote, which unites, in truth, all its conditions of prudence, force, gradual audacity, moral elevation and grandeur, is *Athalie*. Turenne in his last two campaigns and Racine in *Athalie*—those are the great examples of what the prudent and the wise can do when they take possession of the full maturity of their genius.

Racine's *Athalie* and Bossuet's "Discourse on Universal History," are the highest masterpieces that the rigorously classic theory can offer in France to its friends as to its enemies. But in spite of what is admirably simple and majestic in the accomplishment of such unique productions, we ought, in practising the art, to broaden that theory a little, and show that there are ways of widening it without going so far as relaxing it. Goethe, whom I like to quote on such a matter, says:

"I call the classic *healthy* and the romantic *sickly*. To me the poem of the 'Niebelungen' is as classic as Homer; both are healthful and vigorous. The works of the present day are not romantic because they are new, but because they are feeble, sickly, or diseased. The works of the ancients are not classic because they are old, but because they are energetic, fresh, buoyant. If we consider the romantic and the classic from these two points of view we shall soon agree."

In France we have had no great classic anterior to the age of Louis XIV; the Dantes and the Shakespeares, those primal authorities, to whom sooner or later we return in days of emancipation, are lacking to us. We have had mere skeletons of great poets, like Mathurin Regnier, like Rabelais, without ideal of any kind, without passion or serious aim to consecrate them. Montaigne was a species of premature classic, of the genus of Horace, but he gave himself like a prodigal, for want of worthy surroundings, to the libertine fancies of his pen and his temperament. It results that we, less than all other nations, have among our ancestral authors that which enables us boldly to lay claim to literary liberties and franchises. Still, with Molière and La Fontaine among our classics of the great century, we have enough that nothing legitimate can be refused to those who will dare and know all.

The important thing to-day seems to me to maintain the idea and the worship of the classic, while enlarging both. There is no receipt for making classics; that point at least ought to be evident. To believe that by imitating certain qualities of purity, sobriety, correctives, and elegance, independently of nature and its plane, we can become classic, is to believe that after Racine himself there is room for Racine's sons. More than that; it is not good to appear too soon and to contemporaries as a classic; such men stand great chance of not remaining so to

posterity. Fontanes, in his day, seemed a classic to his friends; and see the pale colour that he has at a distance of twenty-five years! How short a time these precocious classics, made so by the moment, last! We turn about some morning and we are amazed not to find them erect behind us—they were only for a “breakfast in the sun,” as M^{me}. de Sévigné would gaily say. In the matter of classics the most unexpected are always the best and the greatest; ask those virile geniuses born immortal and perennially in vogue. The least classic, apparently, of the four great poets of Louis XIV’s era was Molière; he was applauded then far more than he was rightly estimated; people enjoyed him without knowing his value. Next to him, the least classic seemed to be La Fontaine; and see, after two centuries and a half, what has happened for both of them! Much before Boileau, before even Racine, are they not unanimously recognised to-day as the richest, the most fruitful, in their gift of universal moral truth? Let us content ourselves with feeling them, penetrating them, admiring them; as for us, coming at this late day, let us at least try to be ourselves; let us have the sincerity and the natural instinct of our own thoughts, our own feelings. This can always be attained; add to it (which is more difficult) elevation, direction, if possible, toward some high-placed aim; and while we speak our language, and are subject to the conditions of the age in which we live and from which we

derive our strength as well as our defects, let us ask ourselves, from time to time, looking upward to the summits, and fastening our eyes upon those venerated groups: "What would they say of us?"

But why speak always as an author, and of writing? There comes an age, perchance, when we write no more. Happy they who read, who re-read; they who can follow their free inclinations among their books! There comes a season in life when, all work done, all experiences over, the keen joys remain of studying, of going to the depths of the things we know, the things we feel, just as we see, and see again with relish the friends we love: pure delights of the heart and of the taste in their maturity! Then it is that the word *classic* takes its true meaning, and defines itself for every man of taste by his own irresistible predilection and choice. The taste is formed by that time, formed and definite; good sense, if it ever comes, has come, and is consummate. There is no time now to make trials, no desire to start out upon discoveries. We hold fast to our friends, to those whom we have tested by long intercourse — old wine, old books, old friends!

II.

Pierre Corneille.

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Pierre Corneille.

AS a matter of criticism and literary history, there is no reading, it seems to me, more entertaining, more delectable, and at the same time more fruitful of instruction of all kinds than good biographies of great men: not shallow and dry biographies, scanty yet pretentious notices, in which the writer thinks only of shining, and of which each paragraph is sharpened with an epigram; I mean broad, copious, and sometimes even diffuse histories of the man, and of his works: biographies that enter into an author, produce him under all his diverse aspects, make him live, speak, move, as he must have done in life; follow him into his home, into his domestic manners and customs, as far as possible; connect him on all sides with this earth, with real existence, with those every-day habits on which great men depend no less than the rest of us; in short, the actual foundation on which they stand, from which they rise to greater heights at times, and to which they fall back constantly.

The Germans and the English, with their complex nature of analysis and poesy, understand and take great pleasure in these excellent biographies. Walter Scott declares that, for his part, he knows no more interesting work in English literature than Boswell's "Life of Johnson." In France we are beginning to esteem and to require studies of this sort. In our time, the great men of Letters, if they were even less eager than they are to come forward with personal revelations in their memoirs and poetical confessions, may be very certain that they will not lack after death for demonstrators, analysts, and biographers. It was not always thus; so that when we come to inquire into the life, especially the childhood and the first beginnings of our great writers and poets of the seventeenth century, it is with difficulty that we discover a few traditions, little authentic, a few doubtful anecdotes dispersed among the *Ana*. The literature and the poesy of those times were not personal; authors did not entertain the public with their own sentiments or their own affairs; biographers imagined, I know not why, that the history of a writer was wholly in his writings, and their superficial criticism never went to the man below the poet. Moreover, as in those days reputations were very slow in making, it was not until much later, in the old age of the great man, that some ardent admirer of his genius—a Brossette, a Monchesnay—bethought him of making his biography. Or perhaps this biographer



CORNEILLE.

From an engraving of the painting by Lebrun.

was a pious and devoted relative, too young to have known the youth of his author—like Fontenelle with Corneille, and Louis Racine with his father. Hence, in the nephew's history of Corneille, and the son's history of Racine, much ignorance, many inaccuracies catch the eye at once; and, in particular, we find a rapid hurrying over of the first literary years, which are, nevertheless, the most decisive.

When we begin by knowing a great man in the full force of his genius only, we imagine that he has never been without it; and this seems to us so natural that often we never trouble ourselves to explain to our own minds how it came about; just as, on the other hand, when we know such a man from the first, and before his fame, we usually do not suspect what he will some day become; we live beside him without thinking to watch him; we neglect to take account in him of that which it was most important we should know. Great men themselves often contribute to strengthen this twofold illusion by their manner of acting; young, unknown, and obscure, they efface themselves, keep silence, elude attention, and affect no position because they want but one, and the time is not ripe to lay their hand upon it; later, bowed down to by all; and famous, they cast into the shade their beginnings, usually rough and bitter; they do not willingly relate their own formation, any more than the Nile reveals its sources.

And yet, the essential point in the life of a great

writer, a great poet, is just this: to seize, grasp, analyse the whole man at the moment when, by a concurrence more or less slow or easy, his genius, his education, his circumstances accord in such a way that he has given birth to his first masterpiece. If you comprehend the poet at this critical moment, if you unravel the knot to which all within him will henceforth be bound, if you find, so to speak, the key to that mysterious ring, half iron, half diamond, which links his second existence, radiant, dazzling, and solemn, to his first existence, obscure, repressed, and solitary, the very memory of which he would oftentimes fain destroy, then it may be said of you that you possess and know your poet to the depths; you have entered with him the darksome regions, as Dante with Virgil; you are worthy to accompany him, side by side and without fatigue, through his other marvels. From *Andromaque* to *Athalie*, from the "Cid" to *Nicomède*, the initiation is easy: the thread of the labyrinth is in your hand; you have only to unwind it.

It is a glorious moment for the critic and for the poet when each, in his own special meaning, can exclaim with the old philosopher: "I have found!" The poet has found the region where he can henceforth live and develop; the critic has found the inspiration and the law of that genius. If the sculptor, who, in his way, is a noble biographer, fixing for the eye in marble the idea of the poet,—if he could always choose the

moment when the poet is most like unto himself, there is no doubt that he would seize it at the day and hour when the first ray of fame and glory came to illumine that powerful and sombre forehead. At that unique moment in life, genius, for some time past adult and virile, existing uneasily, sadly, within its own consciousness, restraining itself with difficulty, is suddenly called forth by the voice of acclamation, and expands to the aurora of triumph. With time, that man of genius may become more calm, more reposeful, more mature; but also he will lose in *naïveté* of expression; he will make himself a veil which must be lifted before we can reach him; the freshness of personal sentiment will be dimmed on his forehead; the soul will be careful not to reveal itself; a studied countenance, or at least a more mechanical one, will have taken the place of that first free, eager attitude.

Now what the sculptor would do if he could, the critic-biographer, who has under his hand the whole life and all the moments of his author, ought, with still greater reason, to do; he ought to turn into living reality, by his sagacious and penetrating analysis, that which the artist instinctively figures under the form of symbol. The statue once erected, the type once found and expressed, nothing remains to do but to reproduce it, with slight modifications, during the successive developments of the life of the poet, as if in a series of bas-reliefs.

I know not if this theory of mine, half poetic, half critical, is here made clear; but I believe it to be very true; and so long as the biographers of great poets do not keep it before their mind, they will make useful and correct books, estimable no doubt, but not works of the higher criticism and of art; they will collect anecdotes, determine dates, lay bare literary quarrels; but readers will be left to extract the essence, to breathe vitality into the men; they will be chroniclers, not sculptors; they will keep the records of the temple, but they will not be the priests of the god.

{ The general state of literature when a new author appears, the special education that author has received, and the individual genius which nature has bestowed upon him, those are three influences which it is important to distinguish in his first masterpiece, giving to each its part and determining clearly what belongs of right to pure genius. Now, when Corneille, born in 1606, reached the age when poesy and drama began to occupy his mind, when he saw things at first in the bulk, and at a distance in the depths of his province, the names of three great poets (to-day very unequally famous) appeared to him above all others: Ronsard, Malherbe, and Théophile: Ronsard, long dead, but still in possession of a vast renown, and representing the poesy of an expired century; Malherbe, living but already old, opening the poesy of the new century, and placed beside Ronsard by those who do not look closely into the details of literary

disputes; Théophile, young, adventurous, ardent; seeming, in the splendour of his advent, about to equal his predecessors. As for the stage, that was already occupied for a score of years by a single man, Alexandre Hardy, who never even signed his plays on the posters, so notoriously was he the dramatic poet *par excellence*. His dictatorship, it is true, was about to cease; Théophile, by his tragedy of *Pyrame et Thisbé* had struck the first blow, and Mairet, Rotrou, and Scudéry were just appearing on the scene. But all these lesser reputations, scarcely born as yet, which made the pedantic topic of the fashionable alcoves, of that crowd of *beaux esprits* of the second and third class, who swarmed around Malherbe below Maynard and Racau, were lost upon the young Corneille, who lived in Rouen, and there heard only the echoes of the loudest public fame. Ronsard, Malherbe, Théophile, and Hardy composed, therefore, the whole, or nearly so, of his modern literature.

Brought up at a Jesuit college, he had there obtained a sufficient knowledge of antiquity; but the study of the law, to which his father destined him, and which he pursued until his twenty-first year (1627), must have retarded the development of his poetic tastes. Nevertheless, he fell in love; and without admitting here an improbable anecdote related by Fontenelle, and especially rejecting that writer's ridiculous conclusion that to this love we owe the great Corneille, it is certain, by Corneille's own avowal, that this first

sketched-out in the provinces. | He put himself into connection with the wits and poets of his time, especially with those of his own age, Mairet, Scudéry, Rotrou: he learned then what he had not known hitherto, that Ronsard was a little out of fashion, that Malherbe, dead within a year, had dethroned him in public opinion; that Théophile, also dead, had disappointed all hopes and left but a questionable memory behind him; that the stage was growing nobler and purer under the care of Cardinal de Richelieu; that Hardy was no longer by any means its sole supporter, for a troop of young rivals were judging him, to his great displeasure, rather freely, and disputing his heritage. Above all, Corneille learned that there were rules of which he had never dreamed in Rouen, but about which the brains of Paris were keenly excited: such as keeping five acts in one place or getting out of it; to be, or not to be within the space of twenty-four hours, etc. The learned men and the rule-lovers made war on these points against the lawless and the ignorant. Mairet held with the former; Claveret declared against them; Rotrou cared little; Scudéry discussed emphatically.

| In the various plays that Corneille composed during this space of five years, he applied himself to understand thoroughly the habits of the stage and the taste of the public; | I shall not try to follow him in this tentative course. He was quickly accepted by the city and the Court; the cardinal took notice of him, and

attached him to his service as one of five authors; his comrades cherished and extolled him. With Rotrou, in particular, he contracted one of those friendships, so rare in literature, which no spirit of rivalry could ever chill. Younger than Corneille, Rotrou had, nevertheless, preceded him on the stage and, in the beginning, had helped him with advice. Corneille was grateful to the point of calling his young friend "father"; and certainly, if we must indicate at this period of his life the most characteristic trait of his genius and his soul, we should point to this tenderly filial friendship for the worthy Rotrou, just as, in the preceding period, it was his pure and respectful love for the woman I have mentioned. In it there was, as I think, truer forecast of sublime greatness than in *Mélite*, *Clitandre*, *La Veuve*, *La Galerie du Palais*, *La Place Royale*, *L'Illusion*; and fully as much as in *Medée*.

During this time, Corneille made frequent excursions to Rouen. In one of these journeys he visited the house of a M. de Châlons, former secretary of the queen-mother, now retired from old age:

"Monsieur," the old man said to him, "the style of comedy which you have taken up can give you only ephemeral fame. You can find among the Spaniards subjects which, if treated according to our taste by hands like yours, would produce great effects. Learn their language, it is easy; I offer to teach you all I know of it, and, until you are able to read for yourself, I will translate to you parts of Guillen de Castro."

This meeting was great good luck for Corneille;

no sooner had he set foot into the noble poesy of Spain than he felt at ease, as if in a country of his own. Loyal spirit, full of honour and morality, walking with uplifted head, he could not fail to feel a sudden and deep affection for the chivalrous heroes of that brave nation. His impetuous warmth of heart, his childlike sincerity, his inviolable devotion in friendship, his melancholy resignation in love, his religion of duty, his nature wholly unveiled, naïvely grave and sententious, noble with pride and *prud'homme* — all inclined him strongly to the Spanish style. He embraced it with fervour, adapted it, without much considering how, to the taste of his nation and his age, and created for himself a unique originality in the midst of the commonplace imitations that were being made around him. No more tentatives, no slow progressive advance, as in his preceding comedies. Blind and rapid in his instinct, he went at one stroke to the sublime, the glorious, the pathetic, as if to things familiar; producing them in splendid, simple language that all the world can understand, and which belongs to him alone. (From the night of the first representation of "The Cid" our theatre was truly founded; France possessed the great Corneille; and the triumphant poet, who, like his own heroes, spoke openly of himself as he thought, had the right to exclaim, without fear of denial:

"I know what I am; I believe what is said of me."

The dazzling success of "The Cid" and the very le-

gitimate pride felt and shown by Corneille raised all his past rivals and all the authors of tragedy, from Claveret to Richelieu, against him. I shall not dwell here on the details of this quarrel, which is one of the best-illuminated spots in our literary history. The effect produced on the poet by this outbreak of criticism was such as might be expected from the character of his talent and his mind. Corneille, as I have said, was a pure, instinctive, blind genius, of free, spontaneous impulse, and well-nigh devoid of those medium qualities which accompany, and second efficaciously, the gift divine in a poet. He was neither adroit nor skilful in details, his taste was little delicate, his judgment not sure, his tact obtuse, and he gave himself small account of his methods as an artist; he piqued himself, however, on his shrewdness and reserve. Between his genius and his good sense there was nothing, or nearly nothing; and that good sense, which did not lack subtlety or logic, had to make strong efforts, especially if provoked, to goad itself up to the level of the genius, to grasp it in hand, comprehend it, and train it. If Corneille had come earlier, before the Academy and Richelieu, in place of Alexandre Hardy, for example, he would doubtless not have been exempt from falls, errors, and mistakes; perhaps, indeed, other enormities might be found in him than those against which our present taste revolts in certain of his worst passages; but at least his failures would have been solely according to the nature

and trend of his genius; and when he rose out of them, when he obtained sight of the beautiful, the grand, the sublime, he would have rushed to it as into his own region, without dragging after him the baggage of rules, cumbersome and puerile scruples, and a thousand petty hindrances to a vast and soaring flight. The quarrel of "The Cid," arresting him at his first step, forcing him to return upon himself and confront his work with rules, disturbed for the future that prolonged growth, full of chances, that sort of potent, unconscious vegetation, so to speak, for which nature seemed to have destined him. He took umbrage, he was indignant at first at the cavillings of criticism; but he inwardly reflected on the rules and precepts imposed upon him, and ended, finally, by adapting himself to them, and believing them.

The mortifications that followed closely on the triumph of "The Cid" carried him back to his family in Rouen, which place he did not leave again until 1639, when he returned to Paris with *Horace* and *Cinna* in hand. To quit Spain the instant he had set foot in it, to push no farther that glorious victory of "The Cid," to renounce, in gaiety of heart, all those magnanimous heroes who stretched their arms to him, and turn aside to fasten upon a Castilian Rome on the faith of Lucan and Seneca, Spanish burghers under Nero, was, for Corneille, not to profit by his advantages and to misinterpret the voice of his genius at the very moment when it spoke so clearly. But at that time

fashion, vogue, carried minds more toward ancient Rome than toward Spain. Besides the amorous gallantries and noble, conventional sentiments attributed to those old republicans, special occasion was given, by producing them on the stage, to apply the maxims of State, and all the political and diplomatic jargon that we find in Balzac and in Gabriel Naudé, and to which Richelieu himself gave currency. Probably Corneille allowed himself to be seduced by these reasons of the moment; nevertheless, out of his very error came masterpieces.

I will not follow him through the various successes that marked his career during its fifteen finest years. *Polyeucte*, *Pompée*, *Le Menteur*, *Rodogune*, *Héraclius*, *Don Sanche*, and *Nicomède* are its enduring landmarks. (He returned to imitation of the Spanish in *Le Menteur*, a comedy in which the comic (which Corneille did not understand) is much less to be admired than the *imbroglio*, the movement, and the fancy. Again he returned to the Castilian genius in *Héraclius*, but above all in *Nicomède* and *Don Sanche*, those two wonderful creations, unique upon our stage, which, coming in the midst of the Fronde, with their singular mixture of romantic heroism and familiar irony, stirred up innumerable malignant or generous allusions, and won universal applause. Yet it was shortly after these triumphs, in 1653, that Corneille, wounded by the non-success of *Pertharite*, and touched perhaps by Christian sentiments and remorse,

resolved to renounce the theatre. He was then forty-seven years of age ; he had just translated in verse the first chapters of the "Imitation of Jesus Christ," and he desired henceforth to devote the remainder of his vigour to pious subjects.

Corneille had married in 1640, and in spite of his frequent journeys to Paris he lived habitually in Rouen with his family. His brother Thomas and he had married two sisters, and lived in adjoining houses. Both took care of their widowed mother. Pierre had six children; and as in those days plays brought more to the actors than to their authors, and as, moreover, he was often not upon the spot to watch his interests, he scarcely earned enough to support his numerous family. His nomination to the French Academy did not take place till 1647. He had promised, before he was appointed, to arrange to live in Paris the greater part of the year; but it does not appear that he did so. He did not establish himself in the capital till 1662, and until then he derived none of the advantages that assiduous attendance at the sessions procures for academicians.

The literary morals of the time were not like ours: authors felt no scruple in asking and receiving gratuities from princes and seigneurs. Corneille, on the title-page of *Horace*, says that he "has the honour to belong to his Eminence; gentlemen in those days boasted of being the *domestiques* of a prince or a seigneur. This explains to us, and excuses in our

illustrious poet, his singular dedications to Richelieu, to Montauron, to Mazarin, to Fouquet, which so unfairly scandalised Voltaire. About the same period in England the condition of authors was no better, and we find very curious details on this subject in Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" and Samuel Pepys's "Diary." In Malherbe's correspondence with Peiresc there is hardly a letter in which the famous lyric poet does not complain of receiving from King Henri more compliments than money. These morals still existed in Corneille's time; and even if they were passing a little out of usage, his poverty and his family burdens must have prevented his emancipating himself from them. No doubt he suffered at times; and he somewhere deplores "this feeling, I know not what, of secret abasement" to which a noble heart can scarcely stoop; but with him necessity was stronger than delicacy. Let me say it again: Corneille, outside of his sublimity and his pathos, had little skill and tact. He carried into all the relations of life something awkward and provincial; his speech on his reception at the Academy, for instance, is a model of bad taste, insipid praise, and pomposity. Well! we must judge in the same way his dedication to Montauron, much attacked and ridiculed even at the time it appeared. (The worthy Corneille lacked the sense of fitness and propriety; he persisted heavily where he ought to have glided; he—like in heart to his heroes, solid in soul, but broken by fate—he bowed too low

in salutation, and struck his noble forehead on the earth.

Corneille imagined, in 1653, that he renounced the stage. Pure illusion! That withdrawal, could it have been possible, would no doubt have been better for his peace of mind, and perhaps for his fame. But he had not the kind of poetic temperament that could impose upon itself at will a continence of fifteen years—as Racine did later. Encouragement and a gratuity from Fouquet sufficed to bring him back to the stage, where he remained a score of years longer, till 1674, waning, day by day, under numberless mistakes and cruel griefs. Before saying a few words of his old age and death, let us pause a moment to sum up the chief traits of his genius and his work.

Corneille's dramatic form has not the freedom of fancy that Lope de Vega and Shakespeare gave themselves; neither has it the exactly regular severity to which Racine subjected himself. If he had dared, if he had come before d'Aubignac, Mairet, or Chapelain, he would, I think, have cared very little for graduating and marshalling his acts, connecting his scenes, concentrating his effects on a single point of space and duration; he would have written haphazard, tangling and untangling the threads of his plot, changing the locality as it suited him, delaying on the way, and pushing his personages pell-mell before him to marriage or death. "In the midst of this confusion beautiful scenes, admirable groups

would have detached themselves here and there; for Corneille understands grouping very well, and, at essential moments, he poses his personages most dramatically. He balances one against the other, defines them vigorously with a brief and manly saying, contrasts them by cutting repartees, and presents to the spectator's eye the masses of a skilful structure. But he had not a genius sufficiently artistic to extend over an entire drama that concentric configuration which he has realized in places; at the same time, his fancy was not free or alert enough to create for itself a form, moving, undulating, diffuse, multiplied, but not less real, less beautiful than the other, such as we admire in certain plays of Shakespeare, such as the Schlegels admire so much in Calderon. Add to these natural imperfections the influence of a superficial and finical poetic art, about which Corneille overconcerned himself, and you will have the secret of what is ambiguous, undecided, and incompletely reckoned in the making of his tragedies.

His *Discours* and his *Examens* give us numerous details on this point, in which we find revealed the most hidden recesses of his great mind. We see how the pitiless unity of place frets him, and how heartily he would say to it: "Oh! you hamper me!" and with what pains he tries to combine it with "decorum." He does not always succeed. "Pauline," he writes, "comes to an antechamber to meet Severus whose visit she ought to await in her private

apartment." Pompey seems to disregard the prudence of the general of an army, when, trusting to Sertorius, he goes to confer with him in a town where the latter is master; "but it was impossible," says Corneille, "to keep the unity of place without making him commit this blunder." But when there was absolute necessity for the action to be carried on in two different places, the following is the expedient that Corneille invents to evade the rule:

"These two places have no need of different scenery, and neither of the two should ever be named, but only the general region in which both are situated, such as Paris, Rome, Lyons, Constantinople, etc. This will help to deceive the audience, who, seeing nothing to mark the diversity of place, will not perceive it — unless by malicious and critical reflection, of which few are capable; most of them attending eagerly to the action they see represented before them."

He congratulates himself like a child on the complexity of *Héraclius* because "that poem is so involved it requires marvellous attention"; and requests us to notice in *Othon* that "never was a play seen in which so many marriages were proposed and none concluded."

Corneille's personages are grand, generous, valiant, frank, lofty of head, and noble of heart. Brought up for the most part under austere discipline, the maxims by which they rule their lives are for ever on their lips; and as they never depart from those maxims we have no difficulty in recognising them; a glance suffices: which is almost the contrary of Shakespeare's personages and of human beings in life. The

morality of his heroes is spotless: as fathers, lovers, friends, or enemies, we admire and honour them; in pathetic parts their tone is sublime, it lifts the soul and makes us weep. But his rivals and his husbands have sometimes a tinge of the ridiculous; so has Don Sancho in "The Cid," also Prusias and Pertharite. His tyrants and his step-mothers are all of a piece like his heroes, wicked from one end to the other; nevertheless, at sight of a fine action it sometimes happens that they face about suddenly to virtue, like Grimold and Arsinoé.

Corneille's men have formal and punctilious minds: they quarrel about etiquette; they argue at length and wrangle loudly with themselves, even in their passions. There is something of the Norman in them. Auguste, Pompée and others seem to have studied logic at Salamanca, and to have read Aristotle with the Arabs. His heroines, his "adorable furies," nearly all resemble one another; their love is subtle, over-refined, with a purpose; coming more from the head than the heart. We feel that Corneille knew little of women. Nevertheless, he succeeded in expressing in Chimène and Pauline that virtuous power of self-sacrifice that he himself had practised in his youth. Strange as it may seem, after his return to the theatre in 1659, and in all the numerous plays of his decadence — *Attila*, *Bérénice*, *Pulchérie*, *Suréna*, — Corneille had a mania for mingling love in everything, just as La Fontaine had for introducing Plato. It

seems as though the successes of Quinault and Racine enticed him to that ground, and that he wanted to read a lesson to "those tender ones" as he called them. He imagined that in his day he had been still more gallant and amorous than those "young flaxen wigs," and he never spoke of other times without shaking his head like an elderly swain.

"Corneille's style is, to my thinking, the merit by which he excels. Voltaire, in his commentary, exhibits on this point, as on others, a sovereign injustice, and also what may be called great ignorance of the origins of our language. He blames his author at every turn for having neither grace nor elegance nor clearness; he measures, pen in hand, the height of the metaphors, and when they exceed somewhat he calls them gigantic. He translates and disguises in prose Corneille's lofty and sonorous phrases, which suit so finely the bearing of his heroes, and asks if *that* is speaking and writing French. He churlishly calls "solecism" what he ought to describe as "idiom"—namely the construction, or form of speech peculiar to a special language; a thing that is completely lacking to the narrow, symmetrical, abbreviated French language of the eighteenth century. Corneille's style, with all its negligences, seems to me one of the greatest manners of the century that had Molière and Bossuet. The touch of the poet is rough, severe, vigorous. I compare him to a sculptor, who, working the clay to express heroic portraiture,

employs no instrument but his thumb, and, kneading thus his work, gives it a supreme character of life itself with all the jostling incidents that accompany and complete it; but all such proceeding is incorrect, it is not polished, not "proper," as they say. There is little painting or colour in Corneille's style; it is warm rather than brilliant; it turns willingly to the abstract; imagination and fancy give way to thought and to reasoning. It ought to please statesmen, geometricians, soldiers, and others who enjoy the styles of Demosthenes, Pascal, and Cæsar.

In short, Corneille, pure genius but incomplete, with his lofty aspects and his defects, gives me the impression of those great trees that are bare, rugged, sad, monotonous as to their trunk, with branches and sombre foliage at their summit only. They are strong, powerful, gigantic, with little verdure; sap in abundance rises; but expect neither shelter, shade, nor bloom. They leaf out late, their leaves fall early, yet they live on, half-despoiled; but when their hoary brow has cast its last leaves to the autumn wind their perennial nature puts out, here and there, belated branches and green twigs. And when at last they die, their groans, the cracking of their fissures, remind one of that armoured trunk to which Lucan compared the great Pompey.

(Such was the old age of our great Corneille; a ruined, furrowed, bald old age, dropping piece by piece, but of which the heart was the last to die. He

had put his whole life and all his soul into the theatre. Outside of it he was worth but little; brusque, heavy, taciturn, and melancholy, his grand wrinkled forehead was never illuminated, his dulled, veiled eye never sparkled, his voice, harsh and toneless, had no emphasis unless he spoke of the drama, and especially his own. He did not know how to converse, he was out of place in society, and only saw M. de La Rochefoucauld, Cardinal de Retz, and Mme. de Sévigné for the purpose of reading to them his plays. He became with age more unhappy and morose. The success of his younger rivals troubled him; he seemed distressed and nobly jealous of it, like a vanquished bull or an old athlete. When Racine parodied this line in "The Cid"

"The wrinkles on his brow engrave his deeds"

Corneille, who could not understand a jest, exclaimed, naïvely: "Is it a young man's business to come here and turn people's verses into ridicule?" On another occasion he said to Chevreau: "I have taken leave of the drama; my poesy has gone with my teeth."

Corneille had lost two sons, and his poverty scarcely enabled him to provide for his other children. A delay in the payment of his pension brought him almost to want on his deathbed: we know the noble conduct of Boileau on that occasion. The old man died on the night of September 30, 1684, in the rue d'Argenteuil, where he lodged. Charlotte Corday was the great-granddaughter of one of Pierre Corneille's daughters.

III.

Mademoiselle de Scudéry.

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Mademoiselle de Scudéry.

THIS is not a rehabilitation that I am about to attempt; but it is well to put correct ideas to certain names that recur frequently. The books of Mlle. de Scudéry are no longer read; but her name is still cited; she serves to designate a literary class, a fashion of intellect, and the cultivation of *belles-lettres* at a celebrated period: it is a medal that has almost passed into circulation and become a coin. What is its value and its charm? Let us do with Mlle. de Scudéry as she herself was so fond of doing with others: let us examine, distinguish, and analyse.

This young woman, "of extraordinary merit," as they said of her, was born at Havre, in 1607, under Henri IV; she did not die until 1701, at ninety-four years of age, toward the close of the reign of "Louis quatorzième," as she liked to call him. Her father was from Provence; he removed to Normandy and married there, not without transmitting to his children something of his southern temperament. The son, Georges de Scudéry, is celebrated for his pompous

verses, his braggadocio, and his rhodomontades, in which he one day had the misfortune to meet and affront Corneille; for which posterity has never forgiven him. Mlle. Madeleine de Scudéry was far more sensible than her brother; Normandy, if I may venture to say it, was much more apparent in her; she reasoned, she discussed, she argued on matters of mind like the cleverest lawyer or pettifogger. But she, too, had her share of family vanity; she always said: "Since the overthrow of our house"; "You would really think she was talking of the overthrow of the Greek empire," says the malicious Tallemant des Réaux. The Scudérys claimed, in fact, to have issued from a very noble, very ancient, and "ever warlike" family of Neapolitan origin, but established for centuries in Provence. In transforming into her novels the persons of her acquaintance under the guise of heroes and princes, Mlle. de Scudéry felt herself among her own kind.

Having lost her parents while very young, she was brought up in the country by an uncle, a well-informed and worthy man, who gave great care to her education, which was, in fact, much better than young girls were accustomed to receive in those days. Writing, spelling, dancing, drawing, painting, needlework, she learned them all, says Conrart, and she divined for herself what they did not teach her.

"As she had," continues Conrart [first secretary of the French Academy], "a prodigious imagination, an excellent memory, an ex-



MADAME DE VILMONT.
MADemoisELLE MADELEINE DE SCUDÉRY.

From an old print.

quisite judgment, a lively temper, naturally inclined to understand all she saw done that was curious, and all she heard said that was laudable, soon taught herself other things: such as related to agriculture, gardening, household management, country life, cookery, the causes and effects of illness, the composition of many remedies, perfumes, fragrant waters, and useful or delectable distillations for necessity or pleasure. She had a fancy to know how to play the lute, and took some lessons with fair success."

But the lute took too much time, and, without renouncing it wholly, she preferred to turn more particularly to occupations of the mind. She learned Italian and Spanish perfectly; her principal pleasures were reading and choice conversation, of which she was not deprived in her neighbourhood. The picture that Conrart gives us of her early education reminds us of that of Mme. de Genlis in Bourgogne; and I will say at once that in studying Mlle. de Scudéry closely, as I have just done, she seems to me to have had much of Mme. de Genlis in her, with virtue added. To learn all, to know all, from the properties of simples and the making of preserves to the anatomy of the human heart; to be, from her earliest years, on the footing of a marvel of perfection; to draw from all she saw in society matter for novels, portraits, moral dissertations, compliments, and lessons; to combine a mass of pedantry with extreme delicacy of observation and a perfect knowledge of the world,—these are traits common to both of them; the differences, however, are not less essential to note. Mlle. de Scudéry, who had "a very good appearance" and a rather grand air, had no beauty:

“She is a tall, thin, dark person, with a very long face,” says Tallemant. She was gifted with moral qualities which have never been denied. Respect and esteem were, to her, inseparable from the idea of celebrity and fame. In a word, she was a Genlis of the date of Louis XIII, full of force and virtue, who stayed a virgin and an old maid until she was ninety-four years of age.

We should hear her speak of herself, whenever she can do so under a slight disguise. In most of the dialogues in which her personages converse, she finds means to make the one who replies remark after each pretty thing she produces: “All that you say is so well said”—“That is marvellously thought out.” Or, to use a word she affects: “That is admirably distinguished [*démêlé*].” This indirect compliment is addressed to herself again and again; she is inexhaustible in formulas for self-approval. In the tenth volume of *Le Grand Cyrus* she partly pictures herself in the personage of Sappho, and the name stayed by her, “The illustrious Sappho”; those who had read *Le Grand Cyrus* never called her otherwise. There are some passages of that Portrait, for which Mlle. de Scudéry had certainly examined herself. After speaking of the long line of ancestors of which her heroine could boast, she says:

“Sappho has also this advantage, that her father and mother had, both of them, much mind and much virtue; but she had the misfortune to lose them so early that she could receive from them

only the first inclinations to good, for she was six years old when they died. It is true that they left her under guidance of a female relative. . . ."

The uncle is here changed to a female relative, but the rest refers plainly to herself:

"In fact, madame," [this is a narrative which one of the personages is supposed to address to the Queen of Pontis], "I think that in all Greece there is no one to be compared with Sappho. I will not stop to tell you, madame, what her childhood was, for she was so little of a child that at twelve years of age people began to speak of her as a person whose beauty, intellect, and judgment were already formed and were causing admiration to every one. I will merely tell you that never did persons observe in any one, no matter who, nobler inclinations or greater facility in learning all that she wished to know."

Facing courageously the question of beauty, she is still thinking of herself when she says:

"Though you hear me speak of Sappho as the most marvellous and most charming person in all Greece, you must not imagine that her beauty is one of the greatest beauties on earth . . . As for *complexion*, hers is not of the utmost whiteness; but it has such a fine glow that you may say that it is beautiful; but what Sappho has that is sovereignly agreeable is that her eyes are so fine, so lovely, so loving, so full of intelligence, that one can neither sustain their brilliancy nor detach one's own eyes from them. . . . That which makes their *greatest* brilliancy is that never was there *greater* contrast than that of the white and the black of her eyes. Nevertheless this *great* contrast has nothing harsh about it. . . ."

We remark here the negligence of her style, the repetitions, etc. I abridge much (which Mlle. de Scudéry herself never did); I leave out as I go along a great many "but's," and "for's," and "even so's." But from these few traits we can do more than merely

perceive the ideal she wishes to present of her beauty, or, if you choose, the corrective of her plainness. Such the Sappho of the Marais may have appeared to friendly eyes when Chapelain, passing in those days for a great epic poet, compared her, intrepidly, to La Pucelle; and Pellisson, ugliest of *beaux esprits*, made her his passionate declaration.

In this same portrait of Sappho, which is precious to us, she comes at last to charms of mind, on which she enlarges with redoubled complacency:

“The charms of her mind surpass by far those of her beauty. In truth, she has it” [mind] “of such vast extent that we may say that what she does not understand cannot be understood by any one; and she has such a faculty to learn easily all she wants to know that, although one has seldom heard it said that Sappho ever learned anything, she nevertheless knows all things.”

Then follows the enumeration of her talents—poesy, prose, impromptu songs:

“She even expresses very delicately sentiments that are most difficult to express, and she knows so well the *anatomy of an amorous heart* (if it is permissible to speak thus) that she can describe exactly all the jealousies, all the anxieties, all the impatience, all the joys, all the dislikes, all the murmurings, all the despair, all the hopes, all the rebellions, and all those tumultuous feelings that are never well known except by those who feel them or have felt them.”

It was one of Mlle. de Scudéry's claims that she knew and could describe the most secret emotions of love without ever having felt them otherwise than by reflection; and it is true that she often succeeded in whatever was delicate and refined, in short, in all that was not the actual flame. “You explain that so ad-

mirably," we might say to her, like a person of one of her dialogues, "that if you had done nothing all your life but be in love you could not express it better."—"Though I never was in love," she would answer with her prettiest smile, "I have friends who have been so for me, and they have taught me how to speak of it." That is wit, and Mlle. de Scudéry had a great deal of it.

In this Portrait of Sappho she insists strongly that Sappho not only knows to the depths whatever relates to *love*, but that she does not know less all that concerns *generosity*; and this marvel of knowledge and nature is crowned, according to her, with modesty:

"In fact, her conversation is so natural, so easy, so polite, that she is never heard to talk in general conversation of any but those things that a person of intelligence might say without having learned all that she knows. It is not that persons who understand things do not know very well that nature alone could not have opened her mind as it has been opened; but it is that she takes such care to remain always in the proprieties of her sex, that she almost always speaks only of that which ladies should speak of."

I leave the faults of grammar. But here we see a Sappho, both wise and modest, wholly of the seventeenth century, and in accordance with the last good taste of the Place-Royale and the hôtel Rambouillet.

Mlle. de Scudéry made no delay in appearing there; provinces could not keep her long. Having lost her uncle, she hesitated between Paris and Rouen; but her brother, who was taking rank among dramatic

authors and whose plays were succeeding at the hôtel de Bourgogne, persuaded her to settle in the capital. She appeared to advantage from the start; was greeted and extolled by the best society, and began to write novels; without, however, putting her name to them, but hiding behind that of her vainglorious brother. *Ibrahim ou l'Illustre Bassa* began to appear in 1641; *Artamène ou Le Grand Cyrus*, in 1650; and *Clélie*, in 1654.

The true date of Mlle. de Scudéry is in those years, the period of the Regency, the fine years of Anne of Austria, before and after the Fronde; and her fame lasted without check of any kind until Boileau attacked it, like the kill-joy that he was: "That Despréaux," said Segrais, "thinks of nothing but talking of himself and criticising others; why should *he* speak ill of Mlle. de Scudéry as he does?"

To understand fully the success of Mlle. de Scudéry and the direction that she gave to her talent, we must picture to ourselves the higher society of Paris such as it was before the period when Louis XIV began to reign for himself. For some years a taste for things of the mind, for literary *bel esprit* had existed; into which entered more zeal and emulation than discernment and knowledge. The novel of d'Urfé, the Letters of Balzac, the great success of plays, those of Corneille and other writers in vogue, the protection, slightly pedantic, but real and efficacious of Cardinal de Richelieu, the foundation of the French Academy

—all these causes had developed a spirit of inquiry, especially among women, who felt that the moment had come to bring society to their own level. People were freeing themselves from antiquity and the learned languages; they wanted to know their mother-tongue, and they looked to the grammarians by profession. Men of the world made themselves intermediaries between scholars, properly so-called, and the salons: they desired to please as well as to instruct. But mingled with these first efforts of a serious and polished society was great inexperience. To do Mlle. de Scudéry all the justice that is her due, and to assign her her true title, we ought to consider her as one of the *instructors* of society at this moment of transition and formation. It was her rôle and, in a great measure, her design.

In the Portrait and history of Sappho, which can be read toward the end of the *Grand Cyrus*, she shows to what a point she was filled with this design, and she brought to it more discrimination and tact than we, judging her afar off from her reputation, might have expected. Do not think her a professed *bel esprit*; she repudiates it from the start: "There is nothing more annoying," she thinks, "than to be a *bel esprit*, or to be treated as being one when our heart is noble and we are of certain birth." She feels more than any one the impropriety of clever persons, especially women, being received by society on that footing; and she exposes it like a young woman of

good sense and a lady who has suffered from it. One of the greatest of these inconveniences, and the one that gives her the most annoyance, is that persons in society fancy they cannot approach *bel esprits* as they would other people but speak to them always in the grand manner:

“For I find men and women speaking to me sometimes with strange embarrassment, because they have taken it into their heads that I must not be talked to like other persons. In vain do I speak of the fine weather, the news of the day, and all the other things that make ordinary conversation; they always return to their point; they are so convinced that I compel myself to speak thus, that they compel themselves to talk of other things that weary me so that I would gladly not be Sappho when this happens to me.”

I beg pardon of my readers for all these “that’s” in favour of the idea, which is a right one. Mlle. de Scudéry makes many objections addressed to herself on the inconveniences of being a female *bel esprit* and a *femme savante*. Long before Molière she said more than one very sensible thing on this subject. But let us not forget the moment of social life and the sort of difficulties with which she had to do. She discusses very carefully the question of whether it would be well for women, in general, to be taught more than they then knew: “Though I am the declared enemy of all women who play the learned, I nevertheless think the other extreme very condemnable, and I am often shocked to see many women of rank so grossly ignorant that, in my opinion, they dishonour our sex.”

There, indeed, was a defect that needed remedy at once. The education of persons of rank was at that date, 1641-1654, most defective. What ignorance, what strange negligence even in women of intelligence and fame! Mme. de Sablé, the wise and witty friend of La Rochefoucauld could not spell.

"It is certain," says Mlle. de Scudéry, "that there are women who speak well and write ill, and who write ill purely through their own fault . . . It is, as I think," she adds, "an intolerable error in women to wish to speak well and yet be willing to write badly . . . Most ladies seem to write with the intention not to be understood, so little connection is there between their words, and so fantastic is their spelling. Yet these very ladies, who boldly make such gross blunders in writing and lose all their minds when they begin to write, will laugh a whole day at some poor foreigner who may have said one word for another."

One of the corrections that Mlle. de Scudéry urged, and to which she contributed most, was that of bringing harmony between the manner of speaking and that of writing. She made persons of her own sex blush at their inconsistency. All her ideas on the education of women are very just and well-considered in theory:

"Seriously," she writes, "can there be anything more whimsical than the way the education of women is usually carried on? They are not to be coquettish or gallant, yet they are permitted to learn carefully all that appertains to gallantry, without allowing them to know anything that might fortify their virtue or occupy their mind. All those reprimands made to them in early youth, about not being clean, not dressing in good style, not attending sufficiently to the lessons that their dancing or their music-master gives them, do they not prove what I say? And what is singular is, that a woman who can dance with propriety only five or six years of her life, spends ten or a dozen

in continually learning what she can use for only five or six; but this same person is obliged to have judgment till she dies, and to talk to her last breath, yet she is never taught anything to make her speak more agreeably and act with more decorum."

Her conclusion, which she gives with some reserve, (for in a matter, she says, that touches "diversity of minds" there cannot be "universal law"), her conclusion, I say, is that in asking that women should know more than they do she does not wish that they should act or speak as learned women:

"I want it to be said of a person of my sex that she knows a hundred things of which she does not boast; that she has an enlightened mind, that she comprehends fine books, that she speaks well, writes correctly, and understands society; but I do not wish it to be said of her: 'She is a learned woman'; for the two characters are so different that they do not resemble each other in any way."

This is reason; of which there is a great deal in Mlle. de Scudéry's books; mingled, it is true, with far too much argument and dissertation, and drowned in what seems in these days romantic extravagance.

That which to us is extravagance was, nevertheless, the very thing that caused instruction to pass from hand to hand, and reach more surely those to whom it was addressed. Tallemant tells us that in speaking she had a masterful and preaching tone that was not agreeable: this tone was disguised in her novels by passing through the lips of her personages, and to-day it requires some study to find her didacticism. Of real imagination and invention Mlle. de Scudéry had none at all; when she wanted to con-

struct or invent a tale she took some plot in use at the moment; she supplied herself freely from the shops and the wardrobes in vogue; she copied the plot of d'Urfé in *Astrée*. So doing, she flattered herself she allied fiction with history, art with actuality: "It is never permissible in a wise man," she said, "to invent things that cannot be believed. The true art of falsehood is to resemble truth." This was part of a conversation in *Clélie* where they discussed the "manner of inventing a tale and composing a novel." A little more and Mlle. de Scudéry would have preached observation of nature: she makes the poet Anacreon utter almost as good rules of rhetoric as we find in Quintilian. It is a pity she did not put them into practice.

To speak to-day of Mlle. de Scudéry's novels, and to analyse them would be impossible without calumniating her, so ridiculous would they seem. Too much of what was really the absurdity of the times would be attributed to her. To rightly appreciate her novels as such, we must go back to the models that were set before her, and write the history of a whole section. What strikes us most at a first glance is the way she takes the personages of her acquaintance and her society and transforms them into Greeks, Romans, Persians, and Carthaginians, and makes them perform in the principal events very nearly the same rôle that is assigned to them in history; all the while making them think and talk precisely as she saw

them in Paris. *Hamilcar* is the poet Sarasin; *Herminius* is Pellisson; Conrart becomes *Cléodamas* and has, near Agrigentum, a pretty country-house, described at length, which is no other than that of Athys, near Paris. If she meets an historical personage, she at once puts him on a level with the men of her acquaintance; she tells us of Brutus, for instance, he who condemned his own sons and drove out the Tarquins; that he was born with "the most gallant, gentlest, and most agreeable mind in the world"; and of the poet Alcæus she remarks that he was "a clever lad, full of wit and a great intriguer." The actions and behaviour of all these personages (as she travesties them) are almost in keeping with her factitious method of presenting them; a glaze of falsity covers them all.

But how, you will ask, could such novels obtain so much vogue and credit? How could the youth of Mme. de Sévigné and Mme. de La Fayette have fed upon them? In the first place, persons in those days had no real idea of the spirit of divers times, or of the profound differences in manners and morals throughout history. Besides which, nearly all the personages who figured in Mlle. de Scudéry's novels were living and contemporary beings, whose names were known, whose portraits and characters were recognised, from *Le Grand Cyrus*, thought to be the Great Condé, to *Doralise*, who was Mlle. Robineau. All these personages, even the most secondary, were known in

society; the key was passed round, the masks were named; and even to-day, when we know the real names, we are not entirely without curiosity as we glance through her pages.

“You could not believe,” says Tallemant, “how pleased the ladies are to appear in her novels, or, to speak correctly, to have their Portraits seen there; for nothing but the *character* of the personages will be found, their actions not at all. Some, however, have complained of them. . . .” Among those who complained was one of the wittiest women of that period, who said many a good thing that has since come down to us. In the fourth volume of *Le Grand Cyrus* Mlle. de Scudéry gives the portrait of Mme. Cornuel under the name of Zénocrite, making her one of the most agreeable and most formidable satirists of Lycia. The Portrait is very exact. Mme. Cornuel justified the reputation given her of a bold satirist by saying of Mlle. de Scudéry, who was very dark-skinned, that “anybody could see she was destined by Providence to blot paper, for she sweated ink from every pore.” Molière’s Dorine could not have said more.

What is remarkable, and really distinguished in Mlle. de Scudéry’s novels is the Conversations they contain, for which she had a singular talent, a true vocation. She made later, after her novels had gone out of fashion, extracts from these Conversations, which appeared successively in ten little volumes (ten

was her number and she did not go beyond it). "Mlle. de Scudéry has just sent me two little volumes of 'Conversations,'" wrote Mme. de Sévigné to her daughter, September 25, 1680. "It is impossible that they should not be good when no longer submerged in her great novel." These little volumes, and others of the same kind which survive and do credit to Mlle. de Scudéry's old age, are still sought for by inquiring minds, and those to whom nothing that concerns the great century is indifferent. It is not uncommon to hear it said that Mlle. de Scudéry's novels are unreadable and detestable; but it is not so with her "Conversations." It is well to know, however, that the "Conversations," certainly the first of them, are taken verbatim from *Cyrus*, *Clélie*, and her other novels.

One of the first subjects that she treats of is conversation itself :

"As conversation is the social bond of all men, the greatest pleasure of honourable persons, and the usual means of introducing not only politeness into society, but also the purest morality, and a love of fame and virtue, it seems to me that the company cannot more agreeably or more usefully entertain itself" says Cilenie, one of her personages "than by examining what is called Conversation."

Whereupon they begin to inquire what conversation should be in order to be agreeable and worthy of a company of well-bred persons: it must not, they think, be too limited to family topics and servants, nor turned to futile subjects and to dress, which so

often happens when women are by themselves. "Are you not compelled to own," says one of the interlocutors, "that whoever would write down what fifteen or twenty women say to each other would make the worst book in the world?" And this, even when, among the fifteen or twenty, many were intelligent. But let a man enter,—a single one and not even a distinguished man,—and the conversation at once rises and becomes, all of a sudden, more connected, more witty, more agreeable. In short,

"the most charming women in society, when they are together in great numbers, without men, seldom say anything that is worth hearing, and feel more bored than if they were alone. But with men it is not so. Their conversation is, no doubt, less lively when no ladies are present, but, as a usual thing, though it may be more serious, it is also more reasonable; they can do without us better than we can do without them."

Those are shrewd remarks, which show experience of the world and almost of the heart. This whole chapter "On Conversation" is very well thought out; after going over the different defects of conversation, Cilénie or Valérie, or rather the author, in a summary that has no other drawback than being too precise and methodical, concludes that in order not to be wearisome, but to be both charming and reasonable, conversation ought not to be confined to one object but to be made up of all:

"I conceive," she says, "that, speaking generally, it ought to consist more frequently of ordinary and gallant things than of great things; but I also think that there is nothing that may not enter

it; that it ought to be free and diversified according to the time, place and persons about us; I think that the secret is to speak nobly of low things, simply of high things, and very courteously of courteous things, without too much forwardness and without affectation."

But what was still more necessary to render it charming is that "there be a spirit of politeness that shall banish absolutely all sharp and bitter jesting, and also all those things that may, ever so little, be offensive to modesty. . . . Also I desire that a *certain spirit of joy* may reign there." All that is well said, and as charming as it is judicious—as one of the personages of the Conversation did not fail to remark.

Read, after that chapter, the one that treats of "The manner of writing Letters" (partly extracted from *Clélie*), and you will understand how it is that beneath this novel-writing that seems to us so extravagant, there was in Mlle. de Scudéry a serious Genlis, a Miss Edgeworth; in short, shall I say it? an excellent *schoolmistress* for high society and the young ladies of rank of the seventeenth century.

On every possible social subject she proceeds thus: she gives a complete little course, too complete sometimes, in which she combines the historical examples she has collected with the anecdotes she gathers in the society of her day. She analyses all, expatiates on everything; on perfumes, on pleasures, on desires, on qualities and virtues; once, she even makes observations as a natural philosopher on the colour of wings and the flight of butterflies. She conjectures, she

refines, she symbolises; she seeks and gives reasons for everything. Never was so much use made of the word *car* [for, because]. There are days when she is a grammarian, an academician, when she discourses on synonyms, and carefully elicits the meaning of words; in what, for instance, do *joy* and *enjoyment* differ; whether *magnificence* is not an heroic and royal quality rather than a virtue; for magnificence is suitable for certain persons only, whereas virtues are suitable for all; how *magnanimity* includes more things than *generosity*, which usually has narrower limits, so much so that we may at times be very generous without being truly magnanimous. Some of her little Essays are charmingly headed, such as "Ennui without cause." In some of these "Conversations" Mlle. de Scudéry seems to us a Nicole among women; with more refinement, perhaps, but with a background of pedantry and stiffness, which that ingenious theologian never had. And, besides, Nicole sums up all in God and by thoughts of the final end; whereas Mlle. de Scudéry goes no farther than the laudation and apotheosis of the king; into which she puts an adroitness and special ingenuity that Bayle remarks upon, and which is slightly displeasing.

The fact is, this estimable woman, long ill-used by fortune, had early accustomed herself to pay compliments which were useful to her; a little wordly wisdom was at the bottom of all her bad taste. More vapid laudation was never combined with a mania

for correcting the little faults of the society around her. But what of that! She needed to sell her books and to place them under illustrious patronage. Besides which, to describe her friends and acquaintances at full length, their town-houses and their country-houses,—all that served, while flattering their vanity, to fill pages and swell a volume. Sappho was not above these little reasons of trade. “Upon my word,” says Tallemant, “she needs to set all stones to work; when I think of it I forgive her.” Little gifts, emoluments, pensions, she liked to add such positive proofs to the consideration she received, which never failed her. All this contributed to lower the moralist in her somewhat, and to restrict her sight to the narrow circle of the society of her day.

At certain points, however, we think we feel a firm and almost virile mind, which approaches lofty subjects with subtle reasoning, which comprehends their diverse aspects, and which, faithful always to consecrated opinions, is, above all, guided by considerations of decorum.

Mlle. de Scudéry was approaching her sixtieth year when Boileau appeared, and began, in his first Satires (1665) to ridicule the great romances, and relegate *Cyrus* to the class of admirations no longer permissible to any but country gentlemen. The war boldly declared by Boileau against a false style which had had its day, and existed only as a remains of superstition, gave it a mortal blow, and from that day Mlle.

de Scudéry was to the new generation a superannuated writer. Mme. de La Fayette reduced her still further to the rank of venerable antiquities by publishing her little novels, especially that of the *Princesse de Clèves*, in which she showed how it was possible to be succinct, natural, and delicate. In vain might we try to-day to protest against the irrefragable verdict, and to enumerate all the testimonials of consolation given to Mlle. de Scudéry, the letters of Mascaron, Fléchier, Mme. de Brinon, the directress of Saint-Cyr, the eulogies of Godeau, of Segrais, of Huet, Bonhours, and Pellisson. The latter, who distressed and supplanted Conrart, became, as we know, the proclaimed lover of Mlle. de Scudéry, her platonic adorer, whom he celebrated in a score of gallant verses under the name of Sappho. But if anything proves to me that Pellisson, in spite of his elegance and the purity of his diction, was never a true classic and for ever ignored the real Graces, it is precisely his declared taste for such an idol. We cannot conclude anything from the compliments addressed by Mme. de Sévigné and Mme. de Maintenon to Mlle. de Scudéry, then an old woman; those women of gracious demeanour and high breeding continued to respect in her, when they spoke to her, one of the admirations of their youth. As for the other names I have quoted (I except none) it is not, the reader will kindly remark, by good taste or sound and judicious taste that they shine; they have all

kept, more or less, a marked tinge of the hôtel Rambouillet, and they are, in some respects, behind the age. The admiration for Mlle. de Scudéry is a touchstone which tests them all and judges them.

The French Academy awarded for the first time in 1671 the prize for Eloquence, founded by Balzac. This prize, in its origin, was to be given to a discourse or species of sermon on some Christian virtue. The first subject designated by Balzac was "On Praise and Fame." Mlle. de Scudéry wrote for it and obtained the prize, to the great applause of all that were left of the veteran academicians of the days of Richelieu. The Muse who thus carried off at a stroke the first crown, leading the procession of future laureates, was at that time sixty-four years of age.

She continued to grow old and to survive her renown, being literally annihilated in the outside world, though still enjoying fame in her chamber behind closed doors. Her worth and her estimable qualities won her, to the last, a little court of friends, who spoke of her as "the first unmarried woman of the world" and "the marvel of the age of Louis-le-Grand." When she died, June 2, 1701, the *Journal des Savants* of the following month registered these pompous eulogies. About the same time, in the same quarter of the Marais, lived and grew old, though nine years less aged than herself, a woman who was truly marvellous, who had really the grace,

the easy urbanity, the freshness and virility of mind, the gift of rejuvenation—all, in short, that Mlle. de Scudéry had not: I mean Ninon de l'Enclos. There is a lesson in taste in the juxtaposition of those names.

However that may be, Mlle. de Scudéry deserves that just ideas should be attached to hers. Her novels obtained a vogue that marks a precise date in the history of manners and morals, and in the education of society. We shall always remember that a volume of *Cyrus* was sent to the Great Condé, when a prisoner at Vincennes, to amuse him; and to M. d'Andilly, hermit of Port-Royal, a volume of *Clélie*, to flatter him with a description of his desert. With her false apparatus of imagination and false historical paraphernalia, Mlle. de Scudéry was, after all, not more absurd than Mme. Cottin a few years ago. The masquerading attire was merely borrowed: what was really and essentially her own was her method of observing and painting the society about her, of seizing on the fly the persons of her acquaintance, and putting them, all alive, into her books, where she makes them converse with wit and shrewdness. It is on this side that I judge her, and while recognising much distinction and ingenious sagacity of analysis, much moral anatomy, I must add that the whole is abstract, subtle, the reasoning overdone, with too much of the thesis about it; lacking in buoyancy, without illumination, dry to the core, and

not agreeable. It resembles La Motte and Fontenelle, but with much less ease and freedom than either of them. She "distinguishes," she divides, she subdivides, she classifies, she teaches. Never any freshness; the delicacy itself soon becomes didactic and far-fetched. Even in her little summer-houses, amid the parks and gardens she describes, she is careful to put an inkstand. Such appears to me, in spite of all my efforts to represent her to myself as more agreeable, the geographer of the *Pays de Tendre*, the Sappho of Pellisson. If, therefore, I must come to some conclusion and reply to the question with which we started, I am compelled to attach to the name of Mlle. de Scudéry an idea, not of ridicule, rather of esteem, a very serious esteem, but not in the least an idea of attractiveness or grace.

A spinster of such great worth and no grace is, nevertheless, unsatisfactory to paint, and even painful to point out; one would so much rather put in all that was lacking in her!

M. Cousin has lately attempted to make a complete revolution in honour of Mlle. de Scudéry, and in favour of her *Grand Cyrus*. By the help of a printed key, known to exist in the Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal, and of another key, in manuscript, in the Bibliothèque Mazarine, he has endeavoured to give to the novel a serious historical value in relation to the actions and deeds of arms of the Prince de Condé. The Abbé Lambert in his *Histoire Littéraire du Regne*

de Louis XIV, speaking of the immense vogue of Mlle. de Scudéry's writings, gives the following explanation of it:

"It is true that these novels, if we can call them by that name, must be regarded as a species of epic poems and true histories under disguised names. Such is *Artamène ou Le Grand Cyrus*, in which we find a considerable part of the life of Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Condé; while *Clélie* contains a quantity of traits relating to all the illustrious personages then in France."

M. Cousin has given new and piquant and very precise proofs of the truth of this statement in all that concerns *Le Grand Cyrus*, but he goes too far when he attempts to make a military authority of Mlle. de Scudéry, and to attribute to her an importance she could not have in such matters. The fact is, that as soon as we see her Persian or Scythian personages unmasked, and their true names given by the help of a key, as M. Cousin has done with ease, but as no one had had the idea or the patience to do before him, we are convinced that Mlle. de Scudéry, to whom all was fish that came into her net, had received documents from the hôtel de Condé which, under a slight disguise, she introduced bodily into her book: the battle of Rocroy, that of Lens, the siege of Dunkerque under the name of the siege of Cumæ, are described with all their particulars; she printed her notes and extracts as she made them: this flattered the Condés, and spared her the trouble of invention; it "made copy" for the printer, a consideration we must never forget in speaking of Mlle.

de Scudéry. She little thought she would some day furnish arguments for the military discussions of future Jominis, and become herself a staff authority! But the fact remains that, through her, we have the version of the Prince de Condé and his friends on his great deeds of arms, some points of which have been subjects of controversy. She is the faithful echo of the hôtel de Condé in such matters, just as she was the echo of the hôtel de Rambouillet in matters of taste.

NOTE: Sainte Beuve omits to do justice to Mlle. de Scudéry on a point that gives true glory to her name. She was one of a small band who did a work for which France and the world can never be too grateful.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century France had no standard of national language; spoken language was chiefly a variety of dialects; written language was chiefly a learned jargon. Polite manners and personal refinement did not exist. The nobles, who were the sole arbiters of manners, morals, and language, were soldiers trained to war and to the coarse habits of a camp. Women had little influence; there was no such thing as the *home*; the only places for social meeting were dark bedrooms so ill-furnished that the company sat on the floor, or vast halls, like those at Blois, where half a regiment could be quartered.

Such was the state of society when a woman, quietly and without pretension, opened the way to as great a revolution and reform as history can show. In 1608, Mme. de Rambouillet resigned a distinguished place at Court to devote herself to her family, to study, to the cultivation of her mind by intercourse with other choice minds of men and women whom she attracted to her house in the rue Saint Thomas du Louvre. Such was the beginning of the far-famed hôtel de Rambouillet, where the art of conversation was born, where women devoted themselves to the pleasures of the intellect, where men of learning were sought and honoured, where persons of intelligence were received on equal terms without regard to their condition in life, where great lords learned to respect writers, while women held an ascendancy over all which powerfully contributed to refine and polish both writers and warriors. The possibilities of the French language, and of a

future literature were the chief topics of conversation but not the only ones; social manners, religion, politics were also discussed. Among the men who frequented that salon we find the Prince de Condé, Cardinal Richelieu, La Rochefoucauld, Corneille, Bossuet; among women, Mme. de Longueville, Mme. de La Fayette, Mme. de Sévigné, Mlle. de Scudéry, who may be called the historian of the coterie, for her novels are really a portrait-gallery of all these choice persons. It is true that her books are unreadable now and exasperating to literary taste; but we should remember that she made part of a great pioneer work, in which all the actors laid stepping-stones by which social life, literature, manners, refinement, the status of women, were to rise, and rise rapidly to higher things. With this before our minds we can overlook the *Carte du Tendre* (Map of the Country of Tenderness)—which, by the way, was only a bit of private nonsense which her friends unwisely persuaded her to put into *Clélie*—and turn to her solid advice to women, given in her *Grand Cyrus*:

“I leave you to judge whether I am wrong in wishing that women should know how to read, and read with application. There are some women of great natural parts who never read anything; and what seems to me the strangest thing of all is that those intelligent women prefer to be horribly bored when alone, rather than accustom themselves to read, and so gather company in their minds by choosing such books, either grave or gay, as suit their inclinations. It is certain that reading enlightens the mind so clearly and forms the judgment so well that without it conversation can never be as apt or as thorough as it might be. . . . I want women to be neither learned nor ignorant, but to employ a little better the advantages that nature has given them. I want them to adorn their minds as well as their persons. This is not incompatible with their lives; there are many agreeable forms of knowledge which women may acquire thoroughly without departing from the modesty of their sex, provided they make good use of them. And I therefore wish with all my heart that women's minds were less idle than they are, and that I myself might profit by the advice I give to others.”

These words, be it remembered, were written by a woman in the dawn of “culture.”

In the history of the hôtel de Rambouillet the reader is referred to M. Charles Livet's *Précieux et Précieuses*; M. Victor Cousin's *La Société Française au XVII^e Siècle*; also to M. Auguste Brachet's *Histoire de la Langue Française*.—TR.

IV.

Moliere.

IV.

Molière.

IN poesy, in literature, there is a class of men beyond comparison, even among the very first; not numerous, five or six in all, perhaps, since the beginning, whose characteristic is universality, eternal humanity, intimately mingled with the painting of manners and morals and the passions of an epoch. Facile geniuses, strong and fruitful, their principal trait lies in this mixture of fertility, firmness, and frankness; it is knowledge and richness at the foundation; true indifference to the employment of means and conventional styles, every framework, every point of departure suiting them to enter upon their subject; it is active production multiplying through obstacles, the plenitude of art, obtained frequently without artifices or retarding apparatus.

In the Greek past, after the grand figure of Homer, who begins this class so gloriously and gives us the primitive genius of the noblest portion of humanity, we are puzzled to know whom to take next. Sophocles, fruitful as he seems to have been, human as he shows himself in the harmonious expression of

sentiments and sorrows,—Sophocles stands so perfect in outline, so sacred, if I may use the word, in form and attitude, that we cannot take him in idea from his purely Greek pedestal. Famous comedians are lacking; we have only the name of Menander, who was perhaps the most pleasant in that class of genius; for with Aristophanes a marvellous fancy, so Athenian, so charming, injures his universality. In Rome I see no one but Plautus; Plautus ill-appreciated still, profound and varied painter, director of a troop of actors, actor and author himself like Shakespeare and like Molière, whose legitimate ancestor we must count him. But Latin literature was too directly imported, too artificial from the first, copied as it was from the Greek, to admit of much unfettered genius. The most prolific of the great writers of that literature are also “literary men” and rhymers in soul—Ovid and Cicero for instance. Nevertheless, it has the honour of having produced the two most admirable poets of all literatures of imitation, study, and taste—those chastened and perfected types, Virgil and Horace.

It is to modern times and the Renaissance that we must turn for the men whom we are seeking. Shakespeare, Cervantes, Rabelais, Molière, with two or three later of unequal rank, and that is all; we can characterise them by their resemblances. These men had divers and thwarted destinies; they suffered, they struggled, they loved. Soldiers, physicians, comedians, captives, they found it hard to live; poverty,



MOLIÈRE.
From a steel engraving.

passions, impediments, the hindering of enterprises,—they endured all. But their genius rose above their shackles and, without resenting the narrowness of the struggle, kept its neck from the collar and its elbows free. You have seen true, natural beauty force itself to the light amid poverty, unhealthy air, and mean life; you have, though rarely, perhaps, encountered young girls of the poorer classes who seem to you formed and illumined, heaven knows how, with a grand perfection of body, whose very finger-nails are elegant; such beings keep the idea of the noble human race, the image of the gods, from perishing. And thus these rare geniuses, of grand and plastic beauty,—beauty inborn and genuine,—triumph with an easy air under the most opposing conditions; they develop, they assert themselves invincibly. They do not develop merely by chance and at the mercy of circumstances, like such secondary geniuses as Ovid, Dryden, or the Abbé Prévost, for instance. No: their works, as prompt, as numerous as those of minds that are chiefly facile, are also entire, strong, cohering to an end when necessary, perfected again and again, and sublime. But this perfection is never to them the solicitude, sometimes excessive, the constantly chastened prudence of the studious and polished school of poets, the Grays, Popes, and Boileaus, poets whom I admire and enjoy as much as any one, and whose scrupulous correctness is, I know, an indispensable quality, a charm, and who seem to have taken for

their motto, Vauvenarque's admirable saying: "Clearness is the varnish of masters." In the very perfection of the superior poets there is something freer, bolder, more irregularly born, incomparably more fertile, more independent of ingenious fetters; something that goes of itself, that sports; something that amazes and disconcerts the distinguished contemporary poets by its inventive resources, even in the lesser details of their profession. It was thus that Boileau, among his many natural causes for surprise, cannot refrain from asking Molière where he "found rhymes."

Rightly understood, these excellent spirits hold a middle place between the poesy of primitive epochs and that of the civilised and cultivated centuries; between the Homeric and the Alexandrine periods. They are the glorious, still mighty representatives, the distinct and individual continuators of the first epochs in the bosom of the second. In all things there comes a first blossom, a first and full harvest; these happy mortals lay their hand upon it and fill the earth, once for all, with millions of germs; after them, around them, others strive and watch and glean. These teeming geniuses, no longer the divine old men, the blind of fable, read, compare, imitate like others of their day, but are not thereby prevented from creating as in the dawning ages. Their productions are, no doubt, unequal, but among them we find masterpieces of the combination of the human

with art: they know art by this time; they grasp it in its maturity and to its full extent, but without reasoning upon it as others do around them; they practise it night and day with an admirable absence of consciousness and literary fatuity. Often they die (a little as it was in the primitive epochs) before their works are all printed, or at any rate collected and made lasting, unlike their contemporaries the poets and *littérateurs* of the salons, who attend to such matters early. Such is their negligence and their prodigality. They abandon themselves completely, especially to the good sense of the people, to the decisions of the multitude; of which, however, they know the chances and risk as well as any of the poets who scorn the common people. In a word, these grand individuals seem to me to come down from the very genius of poetic humanity, and to be tradition living and perpetuated—an irrefutable embodiment.

Molière is one of these illustrious witnesses. Although he chiefly grasped the comic side, the discordances, vices, deformities, and eccentricities of mankind, seldom touching the pathetic side, and then only as a passing accessory, yet, when he does so, he yields to none, even the highest, so much does he excel in his own manner and in every direction from freest fancy to gravest observation, so amply does he occupy as king all the regions of social life that he chooses for his own.

Molière belongs to the age in which he lived by his

picturing of certain peculiar oddities and the presentation of customs and manners, but he is, in fact, of all ages; he is the man of human nature. To obtain the measure of his genius nothing serves better than to see with what facility he fastens to his century and detaches himself from it; how precisely he adapts himself to it and with what grandeur he can issue from it. The illustrious men, his contemporaries, Boileau, Racine, Bossuet, Pascal, are far more specially men of their time, of Louis XIV's epoch, than Molière. Their genius (I speak of the greatest of them) bears the hall-mark of the moment when they came, which would, probably, have been quite other in other times. What would Bossuet be to-day? What would Pascal write? Racine and Boileau fitted marvellously the reign of Louis XIV in all its youthful, brilliant, gallant, victorious, sensible parts. Bossuet dominated that reign at its apogee, before bigotry set in, but during a period already loftily religious. Molière, who would, I think, have felt oppressed by that religious authority, growing more and more stringent, and who died in good time to escape it,—Molière, who belonged like Boileau and Racine (though much older than they) to the first period, was far more independent of it, although he paints it more to the life than any one. He adds to the lustre of that majestic aspect of the great century; but he is neither stamped by it, nor confined to it, nor narrowed to it; he proportions himself to it, he does not inclose himself within it.

The sixteenth century had been, as a whole, a vast decomposition of the old religious, Catholic, and feudal society; the advent of philosophy into minds, and of the middle classes into society. But this incoming was done amid disturbances, disorders, an orgie of intellects and the fiercest material anarchy, chiefly in France and by means of Rabelais and the League. The mission of the seventeenth century was to repair this disorder, to reorganise society and religion; from the time of Henri IV it thus proclaimed itself, and in its highest monarchical expression under Louis XIV its mission was crowned, and with pomp. I shall not attempt here to enumerate all the stern efforts that were made, from the beginning of the seventeenth century, in the centres of religion, by communities, endowed congregations, by reformed abbeys, and in the bosom of the University and of the Sorbonne, to rally the legions of Jesus Christ and reconstitute doctrine. In literature it is evident, and readily explained.

To the Gallic, jovial, indecent, irreverent literature of Marot, Bonaventure, Desperiers, Rabelais, Regnier, etc., to the pagan literature, Greek, epicurean, of Ronsard, Baif, Jodelle, etc., philosophical and sceptical of Montaigne and Charron, succeeded one of a very different and opposite character. Malherbe, man of form, of style, of a caustic, even cynical mind (like M. de Buffon in the intervals of his noble work), — Malherbe, a freethinker at heart, has nothing

Christian about his Odes except their exterior; but the genius of Corneille, father of Polyeucte and Pauline, was already profoundly Christian. So was that of d'Urfé. Balzac, vain and pompous *bel esprit*, learned rhetorician busy with words, has forms and ideas that hold firmly to orthodoxy. The school of Port-Royal was founded; the antagonist of doubt and of Montaigne, Pascal, appeared. The detestable poetic school of Louis XIII—Boisrobert, Ménage, Costar, Conrart, d'Assoucy, Saint-Armant, etc., did not enter the path of reform; that school is not serious, scarcely moral, quite Italian, a mere insipid repetition of the literature of the Valois. But that which succeeds and smothers it under Louis XIV comes, by degrees, to faith and the observance of law—witness Boileau, Racine, Bossuet. La Fontaine himself, in the midst of his good-humoured frailties and wholly of the sixteenth century as he was, had fits of religion when he wrote the *Captivité de Saint-Malc* and the epistle to Mme. de La Sablière, and he ended by repentance. In a word, the farther we advance in the period called that of Louis XIV the more we find literature, poesy, the pulpit, the stage, taking on a religious and Christian character; the more they evidence, even in the general sentiments they express, a return to belief in revelation, to humanity as seen *in* and *by* Jesus Christ. This is one of the most characteristic and most profound features of that immortal literature. The seventeenth century rose *en masse* and made a

dike between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, which it separates.

But Molière,—I say it without conveying either praise or moral blame, and simply as a proof of the freedom of his genius,—Molière does not come within this point of view. Although his figure and his work appear and stand forth more than all others in this admirable frame of the great epoch of Louis the Great, he stretches and reaches forward, backward, without, and beyond; he belongs to a calmer thought, more vast, more unconcerned, more universal. The pupil of Gassendi, the friend of Bernier, of Chapelle, and of Resnault is directly connected with the philosophy and literature of the sixteenth century; he had no antipathy against that century and what remained of it: he entered into no reaction, religious or literary, as did Bossuet, Racine, Boileau, and three-fourths of Louis XIV's century. He is of the posterity of Rabelais, Montaigne, Larivey, Regnier, of the authors of the *Satyre Menippée*; he has, or would have had, no difficulty in coming to an understanding with Lamothe-le-Vayer, Naudé, or even Gui Patin, that carping personage, doctor of medicine though he was.

Molière is naturally of the society of Ninon, of Mme. de Sablière before her conversion; he welcomes at Auteuil Des Barreaux and a number of young seigneurs not a little libertine.

I do not, by any means, intend to say that Molière, in his work or in his thought, was a decided free-

thinker; that he had any system on such subjects, or that (in spite of his translation of Lucretius, his free jesting, and his various *liaisons*) he did not have a foundation of moderate, sensible religion, such as accorded with the custom of the times, a religion which reappeared at his last hour, and had already burst forth with such strength from Cléante's lips in *Tartuffe*. No; Molière the wise, an Ariste of calm propriety, the enemy of all excesses and absurdities of mind, the father of that Philinte whom Lélius, Erasmus, and Atticus would have recognised, had nothing of the licentious and cynical braggadocio of the Saint-Amants, Boisroberts, and their kind. He was sincere in being indignant at the malicious insinuations which, from the date of the *École des Femmes*, his enemies cast upon his religion.

But what I want to establish, and which characterises him among his contemporaries of genius, is that he habitually saw human nature in itself, in its universality of all periods; as Boileau and La Bruyère saw and painted it often, I know, but Molière without mixture such as we see in Boileau's *Épître sur l'Amour de Dieu*, and La Bruyère's discussion on Quietism. He paints humanity as if it had no growth; and this, it must be said, was the more possible to him, painting it, as he did especially, in its vices and blemishes: tragedy evades Christianity less easily. Molière separates humanity from Jesus Christ, or rather he shows us the one to its depths without taking

much account of the other. In this he detaches himself from his century. In the famous scene of the Pauper he gives, without a thought of harm, a speech to Don Juan which he was forced to suppress, such storms did it raise: "You spend your life in praying to God and you are dying of hunger; take this money; I give it you from love of humanity." The beneficence and the philanthropy of the eighteenth century, that of d'Alembert, Diderot, and Holbach, are in that saying. And it was Molière who said of the Pauper when he brought back the gold piece that other saying, so often quoted, so little understood, it seems to me, in its gravest meaning,—a saying that escaped from a habit of mind essentially philosophical: "Where must virtue needs go niche itself!"—*Où la vertu vatt-elle se nicher!* No man of Port-Royal or its congeners (note this well) would have had such a thought; the contrary would have seemed to him more natural, the poor man being, in the eyes of the Christian, an object of special mercies and virtues. It was he, too, who, talking with Chapelle of the philosophy of Gassendi, their common master, said, while disputing as to the theory of atoms, "Never mind the morality of it." Molière belongs simply, as I think, to the religion, I do not say of his Don Juan or of Epicurus, but of Chremes in Terence: *Homo sum*. We may apply to him in a serious sense Tartuffe's speech: "A man . . . a man, in short!" This man knew frailties and was not surprised by

them; he practised good more than he believed in it; he reckoned upon vices, and his most burning indignation was uttered by a laugh. He considered this sad humanity as an old child now incurable, to be corrected a little, but, above all, to be soothed by amusing it.

To-day, when we judge of things from a distance and by clear results, Molière seems to us much more radically aggressive against the society of his time than he thought he was: this is a danger we should guard against in judging him. Among the illustrious contemporaries I cited just now, there is one, only one, the one whom we should be least inclined to connect with our poet, but who, nevertheless, like him, and more than him, brought into question the principal foundations of the society of those days, and who looked in the face, without prejudices of any kind, birth, rank, and property. Pascal (for he is that audacious man) made use of the ruin he proclaimed of all things about him solely to cling with terror to the pillar of the temple, to clasp more convulsively the Cross. They both, Pascal and Molière, seem to us to-day the most formidable witnesses against the society of their times. Molière, in a vast space reaching to the edge of the religious inclosure, foraging with his troop every corner of the field of the old society, delivering, pell-mell, to laughter and ridicule, titled conceit, conjugal inequality, captious hypocrisy, often alarming, by the same stroke, right-

eous subordination, true piety, and marriage: Pascal, at the very heart of orthodoxy, making the very arches of the edifice tremble, after his fashion, with the cries of anguish that he utters, and putting the strength of Samson into grasping the sacred pillar. But while accepting this connection, which has, I think, both novelty and accuracy, we must not ascribe to Molière more intention to overthrow than to Pascal; we must even grant him less calculation of the whole bearing of the matter. Had Plautus a systematic reservation in his mind when he laughed at usury, prostitution, slavery, and all the other vices and motives of ancient society?

The moment when Molière came upon the scene was exactly that which suited the liberty that he had, and that which he gave himself. Louis XIV, still young, supported him in all his bold and free endeavours, and protected him against whoever attacked him. In *Tartuffe*, and also in the tirade of Don Juan against advancing hypocrisy, Molière foresaw with his divining eye the sad end of a noble reign, and he hastened, when it was with great difficulty possible and when it seemed to be useful, to denounce with pointed finger the growing vice. If he had lived till 1685, till the declared reign of Mme. de Maintenon, or had he lived from 1673 to 1685, during that glorious period of the ascendancy of Bossuet, he would no doubt have been less efficaciously protected, and he might have been persecuted at the last. We ought fully to compre-

hend—through understanding that universal, free, natural, philosophical mind, indifferent, at the least, to what they were seeking to restore—the anger of the religious oracles of those days against Molière, the cruel severity of expression with which Bossuet scoffs and triumphs over the actor dying on the stage, and even the indignation of the wise Bourdaloue in his pulpit after the production of *Tartuffe*—Bourdaloue, friend of Boileau that he was! We can even conceive the naïve terror of the Jansenist Baillet, who in his *Jugements des Savants* begins his article on Molière with these words: “Monsieur de Molière is one of the most dangerous enemies to the Church of Jesus Christ that this century or the world has produced,” etc. It is true, however, that some of the clergy, more liberal, more men of the world, were less severe upon him. Père Rapin praised him at great length in his *Reflexions sur la Poétique*, and cavilled only at the carelessness of the winding up of his plots. Bonhours made him an epitaph in French verse both agreeable and judicious.

Molière was so thoroughly *man* in the freest sense, that he obtained, later, the anathemas of the haughty and so-called reforming philosophy just as he had first won those of the ruling episcopacy. On four different counts—*l'Avare*, *Le Misanthrope*, *Georges Dandin*, and *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*—Jean Jacques will not listen to wit, and spares him no more than Bossuet did.

All this is simply to say that, like Shakespeare and Cervantes, like three or four superior geniuses through the course of ages, Molière is a painter of human nature to its depths, without acceptance or concern about worship, fixed dogma, or formal interpretation; that in attacking the society of his time he represented the life of the greater number; and that in the midst of established manners and morals, which he chastised to the quick, he is found to have written of mankind.

Jean-Baptiste Poquelin was born in Paris, January 15, 1622, not, as was long thought, under the columns of the Market, but in a house in the rue Saint-Honoré, at the corner of the rue des Vieilles-Étuves. He belonged, through mother and father, to families of upholsterers. His father, who, besides his trade, held the office of "valet-upholsterer" to the king, intended that his son should succeed him; and young Poquelin, apprenticed when a mere child in the shop, knew nothing at fourteen years of age but how to read, write, and cipher, the necessary knowledge for his trade. His maternal grandfather, who loved the theatre, took him sometimes to the hôtel de Bourgogne, where Bellerose played high comedy, and Gautier - Garguille, Gros - Guillaume, and Turlupin played farce. After each evening at the theatre young Poquelin was more sad, more absent-minded at his work in the shop, more disgusted with the prospect of his trade. We can imagine what those dreamy mornings following a play were for the

adolescent genius before whom, in the novelty of apparition, human life was beginning to unroll itself like a perpetual stage scene. He at last confided in his father, and, supported by his grandfather who "spoiled" him, he obtained permission to study. He appears to have been boarded out and to have attended as a day-scholar the college of Clermont, afterwards that of Louis-le-Grand, managed by Jesuits.

Five years sufficed him to complete the whole course of the studies, philosophy included; moreover, he made useful acquaintances in the school who had great influence on his future fate. The Prince de Conti, brother of the Great Condé, was one of his schoolmates and remembered him ever after. That prince, though at first, and as long as he remained under the direction of the Jesuits, ecclesiastically inclined, loved the theatre and endowed it magnificently. When converted later to the Jansenist side, he retracted his first liking to the point of writing against the theatre, but seems to have transmitted to his illustrious elder brother the care of protecting Molière to the last. Chapelle was also a student friend of Poquelin and procured him the acquaintance and the lessons of Gassendi, his tutor. These private lessons by Gassendi were likewise shared by Bernier, the future traveller, and by Hesnault, known for his invocation of Venus; they must have influenced Molière's manner of viewing things, less by the details of the instruction than by the spirit that emanated from it,

which all the young hearers shared. It is, in truth, remarkable how free and independent of spirit were all the men who came from this school — Chapelle, the frank speaker, the practical and lax epicurean; Hesnault, the poet, who attacked the powerful Colbert and delighted in translating all that was boldest in the choruses of Seneca's tragedies; Bernier, who roamed the world and came back knowing how, under diverse customs and costumes, man is everywhere the same, replying to Louis XIV, when he asked him in which country life seemed to him best, that it was Switzerland, and deducing on all points philosophic conclusions in the select little circle of Mlle. de L'Enclos and Mme. de La Sablière.

It is also to be remarked how those four or five leading minds came of the pure *bourgeoisie* and of the people: Chapelle, bastard son of a rich magistrate; Bernier, a poor boy, associated out of charity in the education of Chapelle; Hesnault, son of a baker in Paris; Poquelin, son of an upholsterer; and Gassendi, their master, not a gentleman (as Descartes stated), but the son of simple villagers. Molière took the idea of translating Lucretius from these conferences with Gassendi; he did it partly in verse and partly in prose, according to the nature of the topic; but the manuscript is lost. Another comrade who forced himself into these lessons of philosophy was Cyrano de Bergerac, suspected, in his turn, of impiety by certain verses on Agrippina, but convicted, above all, of bad

taste. Molière took, in after years, two scenes from Cyrano's *Pédant joué* which certainly did not disfigure *Les Fourberies de Scapin*; it was his habit, as he said on this occasion, to take his property wherever he found it.

On leaving school Poquelin had to take the office of his father, then too old for service, as valet-upholsterer to the king. For his novitiate, he followed Louis XIII on the journey to Narbonne, in 1641, and witnessed on his return the execution of Cinq-Mars and De Thou; bitter and bloody sarcasm on human justice! Instead of continuing in the paternal office during the years that followed he seems to have studied law at Orléans, where he was admitted to the bar. But his taste for the theatre drew him to Paris, where, having haunted, it was said, the harlequin booths on the Pont Neuf and followed the Italians and their Scaramouche, he put himself at the head of a group of young actors in society, which became before long a regular and professional troop.

The two brothers Béjart, their sister Madeleine, and Duparc, called Gros-René, formed part of this strolling company which called itself "The Illustrious Theatre." Our poet broke away at this time from his family and the Poquelins, and took the name of Molière. He went with his troop through all the different quarters of Paris and then into the provinces. It is said that he played at Bordeaux a *Thébaïde*, an attempt at serious drama, which failed. Farces, Italian plots, and

impromptus he did not spare, such as the *Médecin volant* and the *Jalousie du Barbouillé*—the original sketches of the *Médecin malgré lui* and *Georges Dandin*, which have been preserved. He travelled about haphazard; well received by the Duc d'Épernon at Bordeaux, by the Prince de Conti wherever they met, hired by d'Assoucy, whom he afterwards received and entertained like a prince himself; hospitable, liberal, a good comrade, in love often, trying all the passions, playing on every stage, leading his train of youth like a joyous Fronde through the land, with a fine stock in his mind of original human characters. It was in the course of this wandering life that, in 1653 at Lyons, he brought out *L'Étourdi*, his first regular play. He was then thirty-one years old.

Molière, as we see, began his career by the practice of life and passions before painting them. But it must not be thought that his inward existence had two separate and successive parts, like that of many eminent moralists and satirists—a first part, active and more or less ardent; then, the fire subsiding from excesses or from age, a second part of sour, biting observation, disillusion, in short, which harks back to motives, scrutinises, and mocks them. That is not at all the case with Molière, or with any of the great men endowed, to his degree, with the genius that creates. Distinguished men who go through this double phase, reaching the second quickly, acquire, as they advance, only a shrewd, sagacious, critical talent,

like M. de La Rochefoucauld, for example; they have no animating impulse nor power of creation. Dramatic genius, that of Molière in particular, has this that is singular about it: its method of proceeding is wholly different and more complex. In the midst of the passions of his youth, of hot-headed, credulous transports like those of the mass of men, Molière had, even then, in a high degree, the gift of observing and reproducing, the faculty of sounding and seizing hidden springs which he knew how to bring into play to the great amusement of every one; and later, in the midst of his complete, sad knowledge of the human heart and its divers motives, from the height of his melancholy as a contemplative philosopher, he still preserved, in his own heart, the youth of active impressions, the faculty of passions, of love and its jealousies—a sacred heart indeed! Sublime contradiction, and one we love to find in the life of a great poet; an indefinable assemblage which corresponds with what is most mysterious in the talent of dramatic comedy; I mean the painting of bitter realities by means of lively, easy, joyous personages who all have natural characters; the deepest probing of the heart of man exhibiting itself in active and original beings, who translate it to the eye by simply being themselves!

It is related that during his stay at Lyons Molière, who was already rather tenderly allied with Madeleine Béjart, fell in love with Mlle. Duparc (or the person

who became so by marrying the comedian Duparc) and also with Mlle. de Brie, who were both members of another troop of actors. He succeeded, in spite, it is said, of the Béjart, in engaging the two actresses for his own troop, and, repulsed by the haughty Duparc, he found consolations in Mlle. de Brie, to which he afterwards returned during the miseries of his married life. Some have even gone so far as to find in the scene between Clitandre, Armande, and Henriette, in the first act of *Les Femmes Savantes*, the reminiscence of a situation anterior by twenty years to the writing of the comedy. No doubt between Molière, much inclined to love, and the young actresses whom he managed ties were formed, variable, tangled, often interrupted, sometimes resumed; but it would be rash, I think, to try to find any definite trace of them in his works, and what has been said on this particular point, forgetting the twenty years' interval, seems to me not justified.

The Prince de Conti, who was not yet Jansenist, had made Molière and his troop of the *Illustre Théâtre* act on several occasions at his house in Paris. Being in Languedoc, he summoned his former schoolmate, who came with his actors from Pézénas to Montpellier, where the prince was. There he made use of his most varied repertory, and of his last play, *L'Étourdi*, to which he added the charming comedy of the *Dépit amoureux*. The prince, enchanted, wanted to engage him as his secretary in place of the poet Sarazin,

lately dead. Molière refused out of attachment to his troop, love of his profession, and of an independent life. After several more years of strolling in the South, where we find him bound by friendship to the painter Mignard at Avignon, he came nearer to the capital and settled for a time at Rouen, where he obtained permission not, as some have conjectured, through the protection of the Prince de Conti (who became a penitent under the Bishop of Alet in 1665), but through that of Monsieur, Duc d'Orléans, to act in Paris before the king. This event took place, October 24, 1658, in the guard-room of the old Louvre, in presence of the Court and of the actors of the hôtel de Bourgogne, a perilous audience, before whom Molière and his troop risked representing *Nicomède*. That tragi-comedy over, Molière, who liked to speak as orator for the troop, and who could not on so decisive an occasion yield that rôle to any one, advanced to the footlights and after

“thanking his Majesty in very modest terms for the kindness he had shown in excusing his defects and those of his troop, who had trembled in appearing before so august an assembly, he said that his desire to have the honour to amuse the greatest king in the world had made them forget that his Majesty had in his service most excellent originals of which they themselves were feeble copies; but, inasmuch as his Majesty had been able to endure their country manners, he entreated him very humbly to allow him to give one of those little farces by which he had acquired a certain reputation in the provinces.”

The *Docteur amoureux* was the piece he selected. The king, pleased with the performance, allowed

Molière's troop to establish itself in Paris under the name of the "Troop of Monsieur," and to act alternately with the Italian comedians on the stage of the Petit-Bourbon. When the building of the colonnade of the Louvre was begun, in 1660, on the site of the Petit-Bourbon, the Troop of Monsieur removed to the Palais-Royal. It became the Troop of the King in 1665; later, at Molière's death, it was united first with the Troop of the Marais, then with that of the hôtel de Bourgogne and became the *Théâtre Français*.

After the installation of Molière and his company, *L'Étourdi* and the *Dépit amoureux* were given for the first time publicly in Paris, succeeding there no less than in the provinces. Though the first of those plays is only a comedy of intrigue imitated from the Italian imbroglios, what fire already in it! what flaming petulance! what reckless activity thrilling with imagination in Mascarille! whom the stage up to that time had never known. No doubt Mascarille, such as he first appears, is only the son in direct line of the valets of Italian farce and ancient comedy, one of the thousand of that lineage anterior to Figaro: but soon, in the *Précieuses Ridicules*, he will individualise himself, he is Mascarille the marquis, a wholly modern valet in the livery of Molière alone. The *Dépit amoureux*, in spite of the unlikelihood and commonplace conventionality of its disguises and recognitions, presents, in the scene between Lucile and Éraste, a situation of heart eternally young, eternally renewed from

the dialogue of Horace and Lydia; a situation that Molière himself renews in *Tartuffe* and in the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* with success always, but never surpassing in excellence this first picture; he who knew best how to scourge and ridicule shows how well he knew love.

The *Précieuses Ridicules*, acted in 1659, attacked modern manners to the quick. In it Molière abandoned Italian plots and stage traditions to see things with his own eyes, to speak aloud and firmly, according to his nature, against the most irritating enemy of all great dramatic poets at their outset — affected and finical pedantry, the shallow taste of the alcove, which is mere distaste. It is related that on the night of the first representation of the *Précieuses*, an old man in the pit, delighted with this novel frankness, an old man who had doubtless applauded Corneille's *Menteur* seventeen years earlier, could not restrain himself from calling out, apostrophising Molière, who was playing Mascarille: "Courage! courage, Molière! that is good comedy!" At this cry, which he divined to be that of the true public and of fame, at the universal and sonorous applause that followed, Molière felt (Segrais tells us) his courage swell, and he uttered that saying of noble pride that marks his entrance upon his great career: "No longer need I study Plautus and pluck at the fragments of Menander; I have only to study the world."

Yes, Molière, the world is opening before you; you

have discovered it, and it is yours; henceforth you have only to choose your pictures. If you imitate still, it will be that you choose to do so, that you take your own wheresoever you find it; you will do it as a rival who fears no competitor, as a king to enlarge your empire. All that you borrow becomes for ever embellished and honoured.

After the rather coarse, but honest, spice of the *Cocu imaginaire*, and the pale but noble essay of *Don Garcie*, Molière returned, in the *École des Maris*, to the broad road of observation and truth with gaiety. Sganarelle, whom the *Cocu imaginaire* showed us for the first time, reappears and is developed in the *École des Maris*; Sganarelle succeeds Mascarille in Molière's favour. Mascarille was still young and a bachelor; Sganarelle is essentially a married man. Derived probably from the Italian stage, employed by Molière in the farce of the *Médecin volant*, introduced upon the regular stage in a rôle that has a little of the Scarron about it, he naturalises himself there as Mascarille had done. The Sganarelle of Molière in all his varied aspects, valet, husband, father of Lucinde, brother of Ariste, tutor, poetaster, doctor, is a personage who belongs to Molière, as Panurge to Rabelais, Falstaff to Shakespeare, Sancho to Cervantes; he is the ugly side of human nature embodied; the aged, crabbed side, morose, selfish, base, timid, by turns pitiful or humbugging, surly or absurd. At certain joyous moments, such as that when he touches the

nurse's bosom, Sganarelle reminds us of the rotund Gorgibus who, in turn, brings back the goodman Chrysale, that other jovial character with a paunch. But Sganarelle, puny like his forefather, Panurge, has left other posterity worthy of both of them, among whom it is proper to mention Pangloss, not forgetting Victor Hugo's Gringore. In Molière, facing Sganarelle at the highest point of the stage, stands Alceste: Alceste, in other words, all that there is most serious, most noble, loftiest in comedy; the point where ridicule comes close to courage, to virtue. One line more, and the comic ceases; we reach a personage purely generous, almost heroic and tragical. Sganarelle possesses three-fourths of the comic ladder, the lower by himself alone, the middle he shares with Gorgibus and Chrysale; Alceste holds the rest, the highest—Sganarelle and Alceste; in them is all of Molière.

Voltaire says that if Molière had written nothing but the *École des Maris* he would still be an excellent writer of comedy. Boileau cannot witness the *École des Femmes* without addressing to Molière (then attacked on all sides) certain easy stanzas in which he extols the "charming naïveté of the comedy, which equals those of Terence supposed to be written by Scipio." Those two amusing masterpieces were separated in their production by the light but skilful comedy-impromptu called *Les Fâcheux*, written, learned, and represented in fifteen days for the famous

fête at Vaux. Never did the free, quick talent of Molière for making verse show more plainly than in this satirical comedy, especially in the scenes of the piquet and the hunt. The scene of the hunt was not in the play at its first representation; but Louis XIV, pointing with his finger to M. de Soyecourt, a great huntsman, said to Molière: "There is an original you have not yet copied." The next day the scene of the huntsman was written and acted. Boileau, whose own manner of writing the play of the *Fâcheux* preceded and surpassed, thought of it, no doubt, when he asked Molière, three years later, where he "found his rhymes." The truth is, Molière never sought them; he did not habitually make his second line before the first, nor did he wait half a day or more to find in some remote corner the word that escaped him. His was the rapid vein, the ready wit of Regnier, of d'Aubigné, never haggling about a phrase or a word even at the risk of a lame line, a clumsy turn, or, at worst, an hiatus—a Duc de Saint-Simon in poesy; with a method of expression always looking forward, always sure, which each flow of thought fills out and colours.

During the fourteen years that followed his installation in Paris, and to the hour of his death in 1673, Molière never ceased to produce. For the king, for the Court, and for fêtes, for the pleasure of the public at large, for the interests of his company, for his own fame, and for posterity, Molière multiplied himself, as it were,

and sufficed for all. Nothing hypercritical in him, nothing of the author in his study. True poet of drama, his works are for the stage, for action; he does not write them, so to speak, he plays them. His life as a comedian of the provinces had been somewhat that of the primitive popular poets, the ancient rhapsodists, the minstrels and pilgrims of Passion; these went about, as we know, repeating one another, taking the plots and subjects of others, adding thereto as occasion demanded, making little account of themselves and their own individual work, and seldom keeping "copy" of that which they represented. It was thus that the plots and improvisations in the Italian manner which Molière multiplied (we have the titles of a dozen) during his strolling years in the provinces were lost, with the exception of two, the *Médecin volant* and the *Barbouillé*. *L'Étourdi* and the *Dépit amoureux*, his first regular plays, were not printed until ten years after their appearance on the stage (1653-1663); the *Précieuses* was printed during its first success, but in spite of its author, as the preface indicates, and this was no sham pretence of gentle violence, such as so many others have practised since. Molière's embarrassment in going reluctantly into print for the first time is plainly visible in that preface. The *Cocu imaginaire*, having had nearly fifty representations, was not to be printed, when an amateur of the stage, named Neufvillennaine, finding that he had learned the play by heart, wrote it down,

published it, and dedicated the work to Molière. That M. de Neufvillennaine knew with whom he had to do. Molière's carelessness was such that he gave no other edition of the play, so that the copyist admitted (what would have been plain enough without his admission) that perhaps, in his copy, made from memory, a quantity of misplaced words might have slipped in. O Racine! O Boileau! what would you have said if a third party had thus presented to the public your cautious work in which every word has its value? In this we can see the inborn difference there is between Molière and the sober, careful race, rather finical but with reason, of the Boileaus and La Bruyères.

To guard against other thefts like that of Neufvillennaine, Molière was forced to think of publishing his plays himself in the height of their success on the stage. *L'École des Maris*, dedicated to his protector, the Duc d'Orléans, is the first work he published of his own free will; from that moment (1661) he came into constant communication with readers. Nevertheless, we find him continually distrustful in that direction; he feared the bookstalls in the gallery of the Palais-Royal; he preferred to be judged "under the candles," on the stage, by the decision of the multitude. It has been thought, from a passage in the preface to the *Fâcheux*, that he intended to print his remarks and almost his poetic theories with each play; but if that passage is better understood, it will

be seen that his promise, wholly out of keeping with the cast of his genius, is not serious, but rather on his part a jest against the great logicians after Horace and Aristotle. Besides which, his poetic theory, as actor and author, will be found complete in the *Critique de l'Ecole des Femmes* and in the *Impromptu de Versailles*, where it is in action. In scene seventh of the *Critique*, is it not Molière himself who says to us through the lips of Dorante:

“You are pretty people with your rules, by which you hamper ignorant folk and bewilder us daily! It seems, to hear you talk, as if the rules of art were the greatest mysteries in the world; and yet they are only certain easy observations that good sense has made on what might mar the pleasure taken in this kind of poem: and the same good sense that formerly made those observations can make them again without the help of Horace and Aristotle. . . . Leave us to go in good faith to the things that take us by the soul, and don't seek to reason us out of finding pleasure.”

To finish with this literary negligence which I have shown in Molière, and which contrasts so strongly with his ardent prodigality as a poet, and his extreme care as actor and manager, I must add that no complete edition of his works appeared during his lifetime. It was his comrade and fellow-actor, La Grange, who collected and published the whole in 1682, nine years after his death.

Molière, the most creative and the most inventive of geniuses, is the one, perhaps, who has imitated the most, and on all sides; this is still another trait which he has in common with the primitive popular poets

and the illustrious dramatists who followed them. Boileau, Racine, André Chénier, poets of study and taste, imitate also; but their method of imitation is much more ingenious, circumspect, and disguised, and it chiefly bears on details. Molière's method of imitating is far freer, fuller, and at the mercy of his memory. His enemies attacked him for stealing half his works from the old bookstalls. He lived, during his first manner, on the traditional Italian and Gallic farce; after the *Précieuses* and the *École des Maris* he became himself; he governed and overtopped his imitations, and, without lessening them much, he mingled them with a fund of original observation. The river continued to float wood from its banks, but the current was wider and more and more powerful. What we must carefully recognise is that Molière's imitations are from all sources and infinitely varied; they have a character of loyalty, free and easy as they are, something of that primitive life where all was in common; although usually they are well worked-in, descending sometimes to pure detail: Plautus and Terence for whole tales, Straparolo and Boccaccio for subject matter, Rabelais and Regnier for characters, Boisrobert, Rotrou, and Cyrano for scenes, Horace, Montaigne, and Balzac for simple phrases—all are there; but all is transformed, nothing is the same. In a word, these imitations are for us chiefly the fortunate summary of a whole race of minds, a whole past of comedy in a new, superior, and original type, as a

child beloved of heaven who, with an air of youth, expresses all his forbears.

Each of Molière's plays, following them in the order of their appearance, would furnish matter for a long and extended history; this work has already been done, and too well done by others for me to undertake it; to do so would be merely copying and reproducing. Around the *École des Femmes*, in 1662, and later around *Tartuffe* battles were fought as they had been round "The Cid" and were to be around *Phèdre*; those were the illustrious days for dramatic art. The *Critique de l'École des Femmes* and the *Impromptu de Versailles* sufficiently explain the first contest, which was chiefly a quarrel of taste and art, though religion slipped in àpropos of the rules of marriage given to Agnes. The *Placets au Roi* and the preface to *Tartuffe* show the wholly moral and philosophical character of the second struggle, so often and so vehemently renewed afterwards.

But what I wish to dwell on here is that, attacked by bigots, envied by authors, sought by nobles, valet to the king, and his indispensable resource in all his fêtes, Molière, troubled by passion and domestic jars, consumed with marital jealousy, frequently ill with his weak lungs and his cough, director of a company, an indefatigable actor himself while living on a diet of milk,—Molière, I say, for fifteen years was equal to all demands; at each arising necessity his genius was present and responding to it, keeping, moreover, his

times of inward inspiration and initiative. Between the duty hurriedly paid at Versailles and at Chantilly, and his hearty contributions for the laughter of the *bourgeoisie*, Molière found time for thoughtful works destined to become immortal. For Louis XIV, his benefactor and supporter, he was always ready; *L'Amour médecin* was written, learned, and acted in five days; the *Princesse d'Élide* has only the first act in verse, the rest is in prose, for, as a witty contemporary of Molière said, "Comedy had time to fasten only one buskin, but she appeared when the clock struck, though the other buskin was not laced." In the interests of his company he was sometimes obliged to hurry work; as he did when he supplied his theatre with a *Don Juan*, because the actors of the hôtel de Bourgogne, and also those of Mademoiselle, had theirs, and the statue that walked was a town marvel. But these distractions did not keep him from thinking of Boileau, of strict pledges, of himself, and of the human race, in the *Misanthrope*, in *Tartuffe*, in the *Femmes Savantes*. The year of the *Misanthrope* is, in this sense, the most memorable and the most significant in Molière's life.

Boileau, let us recognise it, although we may blame his reserves in his *Art Poétique* and his innocent and quite permissible surprise at Molière's rhymes,—Boileau was sovereignly equitable in all that concerned the poet, his friend, whom he called the Contemplator. He understood and admired him in the parts most

foreign to himself; he delighted in being his assistant in the Latin macaronics of his merriest comedies; he furnished him with the malicious Greek etymologies of the *Amour médecin*; he measured in its entirety that manifold and vast faculty; and the day when Louis XIV asked him who was the rarest of the great writers who had honoured France during his reign, the rigorous judge replied without hesitation: "Molière, sire." "I did not suppose it," said Louis XIV, "but you understand the matter better than I."

Molière has been lauded in so many ways, as painter of manners and morals and human life, that I wish to indicate more especially a side which has been brought too little into light, or, I may say, ignored. Until his death, Molière was continually progressing in the *poesy* of comedy. That he progressed in moral observation and in what is called high comedy—that of the *Misanthrope*, *Tartuffe*, and the *Femmes Savantes*—is too evident a fact, and I shall not dwell upon it; but around and through that development, where reason grew firmer and still firmer, and observation more and more mature, we ought to admire the influx, every rising and bubbling, of the comic fancy, very frolicsome, very rich, very inexhaustible, which I distinguish strongly (though the boundaries be difficult to define) from the rather broad farce and the Scarronesque dregs in which Molière dabbled in the beginning. How shall I express it? it is the difference between some chorus of Aristophanes and certain rash

outbreaks of Rabelais. The genius of ironical and biting gaiety has its lyric moments also, its pure merriment, its sparkling laugh, redoubled, almost causeless in its prolonging, aloof from reality, like a frolic flame that flutters and flits the lighter when the coarse combustion ceases — a laughter of the gods, supreme, inextinguishable. This is what many minds of fine taste, Voltaire, Vauvenargues, and others, have not felt in appreciating what are called Molière's latest farces; and Schlegel should have felt it more. He who mystically celebrated the poetic final fireworks of Calderon ought not to have been blind to these rockets of dazzling gaiety, these auroras at an opposite pole of the dramatic universe. *Monsieur de Pourceaugnac*, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, the *Malade imaginaire*, witness in the highest degree to this sparkling, electrifying gaiety which, in its way, rivals in fancy the "Midsummer Night's Dream" and the "Tempest." Pourceaugnac, M. Jourdain, Argant, they are the Sganarelle element continued, but more poetic, freer from the farce of the *Barbouillé*, often lifted, as it were, above realism.

Molière, compelled by Court amusements to combine his comedies with ballets, learned to run riot and display in these dances, made to order, his droll and petulant choruses of lawyers, tailors, Turks, apothecaries; genius makes of each necessity an inspiration. This issue once found, Molière's inventive imagination rushed headlong through it. The comedy-ballets of

which I speak were not at all (we should be careful not to think it) concessions to the vulgar public, direct provocations to the laughter of the *bourgeoisie*, although that laugh was promoted by them; they were conceived and produced for the Court fêtes. But Molière soon took delight in them; he even made ballets and interludes to the *Malade imaginaire* of his own free will, without order from the king or intention to produce the play at Court. He flung himself into them, the great man, with a mixture of irony and gaiety of heart, in the midst of his daily sorrows, as if into an acrid and dizzy intoxication. He died in the midst of it, to the sharpest sounds of that gaiety rising to delirium. I find in Cizeron-Rival the following incident which illustrates this point:

“Two months before Molière died, M. Despréaux [Boileau] went to see him and found him much troubled with a cough, and making efforts with his lungs that seemed to threaten approaching death. Molière, rather cold naturally, showed more friendship than usual to M. Despréaux. This encouraged the latter to say: ‘My poor M. Molière, you are in a pitiable state. The continual application of your mind, the continual straining of your lungs upon the stage, ought to make you resolve to give up acting. Is there no one but you in your troop who can play the leading parts? Content yourself with composing, and leave the stage work to some of your comrades; this will do you more honour with the public, who will regard the actors as your agents; moreover, your actors, who are not any too tractable with you, will feel your authority more.’ ‘Ah, monsieur,’ replied Molière, ‘it is a matter of honour with me not to quit the stage.’ ‘A pretty point of honour,’ said the satirist to himself, ‘which consists in blackening his face to make a moustache for Sganarelle and devoting his back to the bastinades! Think of it! this man, the first of our day for wit and for the sentiments of true philosophy, this skilful cen-

sor of human follies, has a folly more extraordinary than those he scoffs at daily! That shows us how small men are.'"

Boileau did not advise Molière to abandon his comrades nor to abdicate the management, which the leader of a troop of actors might well have refused out of humanity, and for many other reasons; he urged him only to quit the boards; it was the obstinate old comedian in Molière that refused to do so.

Posterity feels otherwise; far from blaming, we love these weaknesses and contradictions in a poet of genius; they add to Molière's portrait and give to his personality an air more in keeping with that of the mass of men. Again we see him such, and one of us all, in the passions of his heart, in his domestic tribulations. The comedian Molière was born tender and easily moved to love, just as the tragedian Racine was born caustic and inclined to epigram. Without going outside of Molière's works, we find proofs of this sensibility in the tendency he always shows toward the noble and the romantic. Plautus and Rabelais, those great comic writers, show also (in spite of their reputation) traces of a sensitive, delicate faculty which surprise us joyfully in them, but especially do they delight us in Molière. There is all of Terence in him.

About the time when he was so gaily painting Arnolphe dictating the rules and regulations of marriage to Agnes, Molière, then forty years old (1662), married the young Armande Béjart, younger sister

of Madeleine, and not more than seventeen years old. In spite of his passion for her, and in spite of his genius, he did not escape the misery of which he had given so many sportive descriptions. Don Gavere was less jealous than Molière, Georges Dandin and Sganarelle less deceived. After the infidelity of his wife became apparent to him his domestic life was one long torture. Warned of the success attributed to the Duc de Lauzun in his wife's good graces, he came to an explanation with her. Mademoiselle Molière fooled him as to Lauzun, by avowing an inclination for the Comte de Guiche, and got herself out of the crisis, says the chronicle, by tears and a fainting fit. Bruised and wounded by his misfortune, Molière returned to his early love for Mlle. de Brie, or rather he went to her with the tale of his sorrows, as Alceste is driven back to Éliante by the treatment of Célimène. At the time when he played the *Misanthrope*, Molière, having quarrelled with his wife, met her only on the stage, and it is difficult to suppose that between Armande, who played Célimène, and himself, representing Alceste, some allusion to their feelings and real situation did not occur. Add, by way of complicating the vexations of Molière, the presence of the elderly Béjart, an imperious creature, it appears, with little compliance. The great man made his way among these three women, often as much harassed, Chapelle says of him, as Jupiter at the siege of Ilion between the three goddesses. But I

will let a contemporary of the poet speak on the chapter of his domestic sorrows:

“It was not without doing great violence to himself that Molière resolved to live with his wife in a state of indifference. His reason made him regard her as a person whose conduct rendered her unworthy of the affection of an honest man; his tenderness made him dwell on the pain he should feel in seeing her daily without making use of the privileges of marriage. He was reflecting on this one day in his garden at Auteuil, when a friend of his, Chapelle, who chanced to be walking there, came up to him and, finding him more troubled than usual, asked him several times the reason. Molière, who felt some shame at having so little firmness under a misfortune that was much in vogue, resisted as long as he could; but being in one of those fulnesses of heart so well known to persons who love, he yielded at last to the desire of relieving himself, and he owned in good faith to his friend that the manner in which he was forced to treat his wife was the cause of the depression in which he found him.

“Chapelle, who thought himself above all such things, laughed because a man like him, who knew so well how to paint the weaknesses of others, fell into the very one he was ridiculing every day; and he showed him that the most ridiculous thing of all was to love a woman who did not respond to the tenderness felt for her. ‘As for me,’ said Chapelle, ‘I own to you that if I were so unlucky as to be in such a position, and was convinced that the woman I loved granted favours to others, I should have such contempt for her that it would infallibly cure me of my passion. Besides, you have a greater satisfaction at hand than you would have if she were your mistress; vengeance, which usually succeeds love in an outraged heart, will pay you for all the grief your wife has caused you, inasmuch as you have only to lock her up; that will be a sure means to set your mind at rest.’

“Molière, who had listened to his friend with some tranquillity, here interrupted him, and asked him if he had ever been in love. ‘Yes,’ answered Chapelle, ‘I have been in love as a man of good sense should be; but I never should make a great trouble out of a thing my honour required me to do; and I blush for you to find you so vacillating.’—‘I see plainly that you have never loved,’ said Molière, ‘you have taken the name of love for love itself. I will not detail to you an infinity of examples that would make you see the power of that passion; I will merely give you a faithful account of my trouble,

to make you understand how little a man is master of himself when love has obtained a certain ascendancy over him. To answer you as to the perfect knowledge that you say I have of the heart of man, and the portraits that I make of it daily, I grant that I have studied myself as far as I could to learn its weakness; but if my knowledge teaches me that peril should be shunned, my experience shows me only too plainly that it is impossible to escape it; I judge daily by myself. I was born with the utmost disposition to tenderness, and as I thought that my efforts would inspire my wife, through habit, with feelings that time could not destroy, I neglected nothing to succeed in doing so. As she was very young when I married her, I did not perceive her evil inclinations, and I thought myself less unfortunate than others who make such marriages. Marriage did not lessen my eager attentions to her; but I soon found such indifference that I began to see that all my precautions were useless, and that what she felt for me was very far from what I had desired in order to be happy. I blamed myself for a sensitiveness which seemed to me ridiculous in a husband, and I attributed to her temper what was really the effect of her want of affection for me. But I soon had too much reason to perceive my error, and the passion which she had, shortly after, for the Comte de Guiche made too much noise in the world to leave me in my apparent tranquillity. Finding it impossible to change her feelings, I spared nothing, from the first, to conquer myself. For that I employed all the strength of my mind; I summoned to my help all that could contribute to my consolation. I considered her as a person whose whole merit had been in her innocence, and who, for that reason, had none after her infidelity. I then took the resolution to live with her as an honourable man who, having a light-minded wife, is convinced that, no matter what may be said, his reputation does not depend upon her bad conduct. But I have had the grief to find that a young woman without beauty, who owes the little intelligence men find in her to the education that I gave her, has been able in a moment to destroy my philosophy. Her presence makes me forget all my resolutions, and the first words she says to me in her defence leave me so convinced that my suspicions are ill-founded, that I beg her pardon for having been so credulous. And yet, all my kindness does not change her. I have therefore determined to live with her as if she were not my wife; but if you knew what I suffer you would pity me. My passion has reached such a point that it even enters with compassion into all her interests. When I consider how impossible it is for me to

conquer what I feel for her, I tell myself that she may have the same difficulty in conquering her inclination to be coquettish, and I find myself more disposed to pity her than to blame her. You will tell me, no doubt, that a man must be a poet to feel this; but, for my part, I think there is but one kind of love, and that those who have not felt these delicacies of sentiment have never truly loved. All things in the world are connected with her in my heart. My idea is so fully occupied with her that, in her absence, nothing can divert it from her. When I see her, an emotion, transports that may be felt but not described, take from me all power of reflection; I have no longer any eyes for her defects; I can see only all she has that is lovable. Is not that the last degree of madness? and do you not wonder that what I have of reason serves only to make me know my weakness without enabling me to triumph over it?—‘I confess to you,’ replied his friend, ‘that you are more to be pitied than I thought; but we must hope for better things in time. Continue to make efforts; they will take effect when you least think it; as for me, I will offer ardent prayers that you may soon obtain contentment.’ He withdrew, leaving Molière to muse still longer on the means to allay his grief.”

This touching scene took place at Auteuil, in that garden more celebrated for another affair which the literary imagination has endlessly embroidered, the gaiety of which is more in keeping with the usual ideas evoked by Molière’s name. I mean the famous supper at which, while the amphytrion was ill in his bed, Chapelle did the honours of the feast and the cellar so well that all the guests, Boileau at their head, were rushing to drown themselves in the Seine in pure gaiety of heart, when Molière, brought down by the noise, persuaded them to put off the immolation till the morrow and perform it under a glowing sky. Observe that this joyous tale obtained its vogue only because the popular name of the great comedian was

mingled in it. The literary name of Boileau would not have sufficed to make it national property in this way; such anecdotes would never be told about Racine. Legends of this kind obtain currency only when connected with truly popular poets.

Though Molière did not, after the fashion of several great poets, leave sonnets on his personal feelings, his loves, his sorrows, the question arises, did he indirectly convey something of them into his comedies? and if he did, to what extent? We find in his Life, by M. Taschereau, several ingenious connections made between his domestic circumstances and parts of his plays with which they correspond.

“Molière,” says La Grange, his comrade and the first editor of his complete works,—“Molière made admirable applications in his comedies, in which, we may say, he made game of every one, inasmuch as in various places he jested about himself and his family affairs, and what happened in his own home; this was often noticed by his intimate friends.”

Thus in the third act of the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* he has given a speaking likeness of his wife; in the first scene of the *Impromptu de Versailles* he puts a piquant reference to the date of his marriage; and in the fifth scene of the second act of the *Avare* he laughs at himself for his cough and his catarrh. It is very probable, also, that in *Arnolphe*, in *Alceste*, he thought of his age, his situation, his jealousy; and that under the mask of Argan he gave vent to his antipathy to the Faculty.

But an essential distinction must be made here, and we cannot reflect upon it too much because it reaches to the very bottom of dramatic genius. The traits above-mentioned bear only on rather vague and general conformities, or very simple details; in reality, none of Molière's personages are *himself*. The greater part of those very traits should be taken only as the tricks and little by-plays of an excellent actor, customary with comedians of all epochs and which incite to laughter. No less may be said of the so-called copies which Molière is said to have made of certain originals. Alceste is said to be the portrait of M. de Montausier, the Bourgeois that of Rohault; the Avare that of President de Bercy, and so on: here it is the Comte de Grammont, there the Duc de La Feuillade who takes the honours of the play. Dangeau, Tallemant, Gui Patin, Cizeron-Rival, all those amateurs of *ana*, plunge into discourse with ingenuous zeal, and keep us informed of their anecdotal discoveries. It is all futile: Alceste is no more M. de Montausier than he is Molière, than he is Boileau, of whom he reproduces certain features. Even the huntsman of the *Fâcheux* is not M. de Soyecourt solely, and Trissotin is the Abbé Cotin only for a moment in his verse. Molière's personages, in a word, are not copies but creations. He invents, he engenders them; they may have an air, here or there, of resemblance to such or such an individual, but they are, as a total, themselves only. To view them other-

wise is to ignore what is multiform and complex in that mysterious dramatic physiology of which the author alone has the secret; he alone knows the point to which the copy goes and where creation begins; he alone can distinguish the sinuous line, the knitting together, — more learnedly, more divinely accomplished than that of the shoulder of Pelops.

In that order of minds which includes, through divers ages and in divers ranks, Cervantes, Rabelais, Le Sage, Fielding, Beaumarchais, and Walter Scott, Molière is, with Shakespeare, the most complete example of the dramatic and, properly so-called, creative faculty. Shakespeare has, above Molière, pathetic touches and flashes of the terrible—Macbeth, King Lear, Ophelia—but Molière redeems in some respects this loss by the number, the perfection, the continual and profound weaving together of his principal characters. In all these great men evidently, but in Molière more evidently still, the dramatic genius is not an outside extension, expansion of a lyrical and personal faculty, which, starting from its own interior sentiments, toils to transport them outwardly and make them live, as much as possible, under other masks (Byron in his tragedies, for instance); nor is it the pure and simple application of a faculty of critical, analytical observation, which carefully exhibits in the personages of its composition the scattered traits it has collected. There is a whole class of true dramatists who have something lyrical, in one sense almost

blind, in their inspiration; a warmth, a glow, born of an inward vivid sentiment, which they impart directly to their personages. Molière said of Corneille: "He has an elf that comes from time to time and whispers excellent verses in his ear; then it leaves him, saying: 'Let us see how he will get on without me': he does nothing good and the elf makes merry at him."

In truth, Corneille, Crébillon, Schiller, Ducis, old Marlowe, were each and all subject to elves, to sudden, direct emotions, in the crises of their dramatic impulse. They did not govern their genius with the fulness and consistency of human freedom. Often sublime and magnificent, they obeyed some mysterious cry of instinct, or some noble warmth of blood, like generous animals, lions or bulls; they knew not fully what they did. Molière, like Shakespeare, does know; like that great forerunner, he moves in a sphere more freely broad, and thus superior; he governs himself, he rules his fire, ardent in his work but lucid in his ardour.

This lucidity, nevertheless, his habitual coldness of nature in the midst of so stirring a work, do not aspire to the predetermined, icy impartiality, such as we have seen in Goethe, that Talleyrand of art—such critical subtleties in the bosom of poesy were not as yet invented. Molière and Shakespeare are two brothers of the primitive race; with this difference, as I conceive, that in common life Shakespeare, poet of tears and terror, would readily develop a more smiling and happier nature, while Molière, the joyous

comedian, would yield himself more and more to melancholy and silence.

Mlle. Poisson, wife of the comedian of that name, has left the following portrait of Molière, which those painted by Mignard do not contradict as to physical traits, and which satisfies the mind by the frank, honest image it suggests:

"Molière," she says, "was neither too fat nor too thin; his figure was tall rather than short, his bearing noble, his leg handsome. He walked gravely, had a very serious air, a big nose, a large mouth, thick lips, a brown skin, black, heavy eyebrows, and the movements he gave to them made his countenance extremely comical. With regard to his character: he was gentle, obliging, generous; he liked to harangue; and when he read his plays to the comedians he wanted them to bring their children, that he might make conjectures from their natural emotions."

What is shown in these few lines of Molière's manly beauty reminds me of a tale told by Tieck of the "very human face" of Shakespeare. Shakespeare, young, and then unknown, was waiting in the parlour of an inn for the arrival of Lord Southampton, who was about to become his protector and friend. He was listening silently to the poet Marlowe, who, without taking notice of the unknown youth, was giving vent to a noisy enthusiasm. Lord Southampton, having arrived in the town, sent his page to the inn: "You are to go," he said, "into the common room; there, you must look attentively at all the faces; some, remember this, will look to you like the faces of less noble animals, others will have the faces

of more noble animals; but search on farther till you find a face that seems to you to resemble nothing but a human face. That is the man I want; salute him, and bring him to me." The young page hastened away; he entered the common room and examined the faces; after a slow examination, finding the face of the poet Marlowe the handsomest of all, he thought he must be the man and took him to his master. Marlowe's countenance was not without resemblance to the head of a noble bull, and the page, child that he still was, was struck by it. But Lord Southampton afterwards showed him his mistake, and explained to him how the human and fitly proportioned face of Shakespeare, less striking when first seen, was, nevertheless, the more beautiful. What Tieck says of faces he means to apply, we feel sure, to the inward genius.

Molière never separated dramatic works from their representation; he was equally director, excellent actor, and fine poet. He loved, as I have said, the boards, the stage, the public; he clung to his prerogatives as director, he liked to harangue on certain solemn occasions, and to face an audience that was sometimes stormy. It is told how he pacified by a speech a party of angry *mousquetaires*, whose right of entrance to the theatre had been withdrawn. As actor, his contemporaries agree in according him great perfection in comedy, but a perfection acquired through study and by force of will:

"Nature," says Mlle. Poisson, "had denied him those external gifts so necessary for the stage, especially for tragic rôles. A muffled voice, harsh inflections, a volubility of tongue that made his declamation precipitate, rendered him on this side very inferior to the actors of the hôtel de Bourgogne. But he did himself justice and confined his acting chiefly to a style in which his defects were more bearable. He had much difficulty, however, in succeeding, and he did not conquer his volubility, so contrary to fine articulation, without continual efforts that caused him a hiccough which he never lost to the day of his death and of which he knew well how to make use on occasions. To vary the inflections of his voice, he was the first to use certain unusual tones, for which, in the beginning, he was accused of affectation, but to which people soon accustomed themselves. He gave pleasure not only in the rôles of Mascarille, Sganarelle and Hali, but he excelled in those of the highest comedy, such as Arnolphe, Orgon, Harpagon. It was then that by truth of sentiment, by intelligence of expression, by all the delicacies of his art he fascinated the spectators to the point of no longer distinguishing the personage represented from the comedian who represented him. He always took for himself the longest and most difficult parts."

Molière was grand and sumptuous in his manner of living, possessing thirty thousand *livres* a year, which he spent in liberalities, receptions, and benefactions. His domestic service was not confined to the good Laforest, the celebrated confidant of his verses, and people of rank, to whom he always returned their hospitalities, found nothing bourgeois and *à la* Corneille in his home. He resided, during the latter part of his life, in the rue de Richelieu, facing the rue Traversière, about where No. 34 stands to-day.

Having reached the age of forty, at the summit of his art and apparently of his fame, strong in the king's regard, protected and sought by the nobles, frequently sent for by the Prince de Condé, going to the Duc de

La Rochefoucauld to read his *Femmes Savantes*, and to the old Cardinal de Retz to read the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* — was Molière (independently of his domestic discords), I will not say happy in his life, but satisfied with his position in the world? or must we assert that he was not? Stifle, attenuate, disguise the fact under all imaginable reserves, there was ever in Molière's position, in spite of the brilliancy of his talent and his favour, something from which he suffered. He suffered in lacking at times a certain serious and lofty consideration; the comedian in him detracted from the poet. Every one laughed at his plays, but all did not esteem them enough; too many people took him as their best means of amusement, and he felt it deeply. Mme. de Sévigné speaks of sending for him to tickle and enliven "that good old cardinal." Chapelle called him "great man," but his chief friends, Boileau among them, regretted in him a mixture of the buffoon. After his death, de Visé, in a letter to Grimarest, contests his right to be called "*Monsieur*"; and while his funeral procession was passing along the streets, a woman of the populace being asked whose it was, answered: "Only that Molière." Another woman, who was at her window and overheard the remark, cried out: "How! You miserable woman! He is *monsieur* for such as you!" Molière, clear-sighted and inexorable observer that he was, could have lost nothing of a thousand such mean and petty affronts which he swallowed with outward

contempt. Certain honours were a poor compensation, and sometimes a bitter one, I fancy; such as the honour of making, in the capacity of a servant, Louis XIV's bed. And again, when Louis XIV made him sit at his own table and said aloud, offering him the wing of a chicken: "Here am I giving supper to Molière, whom my officers do not think good enough company for them."

Ten months before his death, Molière, by the mediation of mutual friends, was reconciled to his wife, whom he still loved, and even became father of a child which did not live. The change of habits, caused by this resumption of married life, increased the inflammatory state of his lungs. Two months before his death he received the visit from Boileau of which I have spoken. On the day of the fourth representation of the *Malade imaginaire* he felt more ill than usual; but here I will let Grimarest speak, he having received from the actor Baron the details of the scene, the plain *naïveté* of which seems to me preferable to the more concise correctness of others who have reproduced it:

"Molière, feeling more oppressed in his lungs than usual, sent for his wife, to whom he said in presence of Baron: 'My whole life has been equally mingled with pleasure and pain; I have thought myself happy; but to-day, when I am so overwhelmed with sufferings that I cannot count on a single instant of relief, I see that I must give up the game; I can bear up no longer against sufferings and vexations which give me not one moment's reprieve. But,' he added, after reflecting awhile, 'how much a man can suffer without dying! Still, I feel that I am coming to my end.' Mlle. Molière and Baron were deeply

touched by this address, which they did not expect, in spite of his condition, and they implored him, with tears in their eyes, not to act that evening, but to take some rest and recover. 'How can you wish me to do so?' he said; 'there are fifty poor workmen who have only their daily wages to live on; what would they do if I did not act? I should reproach myself for having neglected to give them bread unless I were absolutely unable to do so.'

But he sent for the comedians and said to them that, feeling more uncomfortable than usual, he could not play that day unless they were ready to act at four o'clock precisely. "Otherwise," he said to them, "I cannot act and you must refund the money." The comedians had the chandeliers lighted and the curtain raised at four o'clock precisely. Molière acted with great difficulty, and half the spectators noticed that in pronouncing the word *Jure*, in the ceremony of the *Malade imaginaire*, a convulsion seized him. Observing himself that the audience had perceived it, he made an effort, and concealed by a forced laugh what had happened to him.

"When the play was over he took his dressing-gown and went into Baron's box and asked him what was said of the piece. M. Baron replied that his plays always had good success the closer they were examined, and the more they were acted the more they were liked. 'But,' he added, 'you seem to us more ill than you were.' 'That is true,' replied Molière, 'I am chilled to death.' Baron, after touching his hands, which he found like ice, put them in his muff to warm them; he then sent for Molière's porters to take him home as quickly as possible, and did not himself leave the side of the chair, fearing that something might happen between the Palais-Royal and the rue de Richelieu, where Molière lived. When he was in his room Baron wanted him to take some bouillon, of which Mlle. Molière always had a provision for herself, for no one could take more care of themselves than she did.

‘Eh! no,’ said Molière, ‘my wife’s bouillons are strong as brandy to me; you know all the ingredients she puts into them. Give me instead a little bit of Parmesan cheese.’ Laforest brought him some; he ate it with a bit of bread, and had himself put to bed. He had not been there more than a minute when he sent to his wife for a pillow filled with a drug she had promised him to make him sleep. ‘All which does not enter the body,’ he said, ‘I try willingly; but remedies taken internally frighten me; it would take very little to make me lose what remains to me of life.’

“An instant later he was seized with an extremely violent cough. After spitting, he asked for a light. ‘Here,’ he said, ‘is a change.’ Baron, seeing the blood he had just thrown up, cried out in terror. ‘Don’t be frightened,’ said Molière, ‘you have seen me throw up much more. Nevertheless,’ he added, ‘go and tell my wife to come up.’ He remained in the care of two sisters of charity, of those who come to Paris to beg for the poor during Lent, and to whom he was in the habit of giving hospitality. They gave to him in this last moment of his life the edifying succour to be expected of their charity, and he made apparent to them the sentiments of a good Christian, and all the resignation that he owed to the will of the Lord. He rendered up his soul in the arms of these two good sisters; the blood that flowed in abundance from his mouth suffocated him, so that when his wife and Baron came up they found him dead.”

It was Friday, February 17, 1673, at ten in the evening, one hour at the most after leaving the stage, that Molière breathed his last sigh, at the age of fifty-one years, less a few days. The rector of Saint-Eustache, his parish church, refused him Christian burial, as not having been reconciled with the Church before death. Molière’s widow addressed a petition on the 20th of February to the Archbishop of Paris, Harlay de Champvallon. Accompanied by the rector of Auteuil, she went to Versailles and threw herself at the king’s feet; but the good rector seized the occasion to free himself of a suspicion of Jansenism, and the

king silenced him. Besides which, if all must be told, Molière, being dead, could no longer amuse Louis XIV, and the immense selfishness of the monarch, that hideous, incurable selfishness laid bare to us by Saint-Simon, resumed the upper hand. Louis XIV sent the widow and the rector abruptly away, at the same time writing to the archbishop to find some middle course. On the 21st of February Molière's body, accompanied by two priests, was carried by night to the cemetery of Saint-Joseph, rue Montmartre. Two hundred persons followed it, each bearing a torch; no funeral anthem was allowed to be sung. On the day of the obsequies the crowd, always fanatic, assembled around Molière's house with apparently hostile intentions; it was dispersed by flinging money to it. The same Parisian crowd was less easily dispersed on the occasion of the funeral of Louis XIV.

Hardly was he dead, before Molière was appreciated on all sides. We know the magnificent lines of Boileau, who rose in them to eloquence. Molière's reputation has since shone ever higher and incontestable. The eighteenth century did more than confirm it,—it proclaimed it with a sort of philosophical pride. Our own young century, accepting that fame and never calling it in question, made use of it, at certain times, as an auxiliary, as an arm of defence or condemnation. But later, comprehending it in a more equitable manner, comparing it, according to philosophy and art, with other renowns of neighbouring

nations, it has better understood and respected it. Constantly enlarging in this way, Molière's reputation (marvellous privilege!) has reached its true measure, has equalled truth, but has not passed beyond it. His genius is henceforth one of the ornaments, one of the claims of the genius of humanity itself. Among the great world-fames that survive and last there are many that maintain themselves afar, so to speak; whose names last better than their works in the memory of mankind. Molière is of a smaller number, whose life and works are sharers in all the possible conquests of the new civilisation. Reputations, future geniuses, books, may multiply; civilisations may transform themselves hereafter, but five or six great works have entered inalienably the depths of human thought. Every coming man who can read is one reader the more for Molière.

V.

La fontaine.

V.

La Fontaine.

IN these rapid essays, by which I endeavour to recall the attention of my readers and myself to pacific memories of literature and poesy, I have imposed no law upon myself; I have simply certain principles of art and literary criticism which I seek to apply, without violence and in a kindly spirit, to the illustrious authors of our two preceding centuries. Moreover, the impression that a recent and fresh reading of their works leaves upon me—a simple, frank impression, quick and naïve—is that which, above all, decides the tone and colour of my remarks; it is that which impels me to severity against Jean-Jacques, to esteem for Boileau, to admiration for Mme. de Sévigné, Regnier, and others. To-day it is La Fontaine. Coming to him after so many panegyrists and biographers, I find myself condemned to say nothing fundamentally new and to do no more than reproduce in my own way, assigning other reasons at times, the same conclusions of praise, the same homage of a disarmed and loving criticism.

It must be said, however, that if La Harpe and Chamfort praised La Fontaine with intuitive sagacity,

they detached him far too much from his century, which was much less known to them than to us. The eighteenth century, in fact, knew little of Louis XIV's epoch, except that part of it that continued and was prevalent under Louis XV. It ignored or disdained one whole portion, by which that reign looked back to precedents; a portion certainly not less original, which Saint-Simon unveils for us to-day. Those wonderful Memoirs, which until now have been thought to ruin the glorious prestige and grandeur of Louis XIV, seem to us in these days to restore to that memorable epoch a character of grandeur and power, hitherto unsuspected, and to rehabilitate it loftily in public opinion, along the very lines that destroy the notions of superficial admiration. There will come, I think, as great variation in our judgment of Louis XIV's epoch as there has been in our ways of seeing and judging the things of Greece and the Middle Ages. For instance, men studied little, or, at any rate, they little understood the Greek theatre; they admired it for qualities it did not have; then, casting a rapid glance upon it and perceiving that those qualities they considered indispensable were often lacking to it, they treated it lightly,—witness Voltaire and La Harpe. Finally, studying it better, like M. Villemain, men began to admire it precisely for not possessing those qualities of false nobleness and stilted dignity which they thought they saw in the first instance, and, later, were disappointed not to find.



LA FONTAINE.
From a steel engraving.

Opinions have followed the same course on the Middle Ages, on chivalry, on the Gothic. To the golden age of fancy succeeded sterner studies, which cast some trouble into that first romantic region; then those studies, becoming stronger and more intelligent, came at last to an age, not of gold but of iron, yet marvellous still; an age of simple priests and monks more powerful than kings, of mighty barons whose enormous bones and gigantic armour frighten us; an art of granite and of stone, learned, delicate, ærial, majestic, mystical. In like manner the monarchy of Louis XIV, admired at first for the ostentatious and apparent regularity and order that Voltaire extols, then revealed in its real infirmity by the Memoirs of Dangeau and the Princess Palatine, and belittled intentionally by Lemontey, reappears to us in Saint-Simon vast, impeded, fluctuating, in a confusion that is not without grandeur and beauty; with the running-gear of the old abolished constitution more and more useless, but with all that habit retains of form and motion even after the spirit and meaning of things have passed away; already subject to despotic good pleasure, but ill-disciplined for the supreme etiquette that was about to triumph.

This being clearly laid down, it becomes easy to put in their right place, and to see in their true light, the men native to the time who, in their conduct and in their works, have done much besides fulfilling the programme of the master. Without this general

knowledge we run some risk of considering them too much apart, as beings aloof and accidental. This is what the critics of the last century did in speaking of La Fontaine; they isolated him, and they exaggerated him in their portraits; they gave him a far more complete personality than was needed in regard to his works, and they imagined him, out of all proportion, a jovial fellow and fable-maker. They could explain to themselves Boileau and Racine far more easily, because they belonged to the regular and visible portion of the epoch and were its purest literary expression.

There were men who, following the general movement of their century, retain none the less a deep, indelible individuality: Molière is, perhaps, the most striking example. There are others who, without going in the direction of the general movement, and showing consequently a certain originality of their own, have less of it than they seem to have. In the style or manner that discriminates them from their contemporaries there is much imitation of the preceding age; and in this striking contrast which they present to what surrounds them we ought to recognise and allow for what belongs of right to their predecessors. It is among the men of this class that La Fontaine must be ranked; he was, in fact, under Louis XIV, the last and the greatest of the poets of the sixteenth century.

Born in 1621, at Château Thierry in Touraine, his

education was much neglected, and he early gave proof of his extreme inclination to let himself go in life and to obey the impressions of the moment. A canon of Soissons having one day lent him a few books of piety, the young lad fancied he had a leaning to the clerical profession, and he entered the seminary. He was not long in leaving it; and his father, having married him, made over to him his office of Director of Waters and Forests. But La Fontaine, with his natural forgetfulness and laziness, accustomed himself by degrees to live as if he had neither office nor wife. He was not as yet a poet, however, or, at any rate, he did not know that he was one. Chance put him in the way of knowing it. An officer who was in winter quarters at Château Thierry read to him one day an ode by Malherbe, the subject of which was an attempt on the life of Henri IV; and La Fontaine, from that moment, thought he was destined to write odes. He composed a number, it is said, and very bad ones; but one of his relations, named Pintrel, and a schoolmate, Maucroix, dissuaded him from that style and urged him to study the classics. It was also about this time that he began to read Rabelais, Marot, and the poets of the sixteenth century, the basis of a provincial library at that period. In 1654 he published a translation in verse of the "Eunuch" of Terence; and one of his wife's relations, Jannart, friend and deputy of Fouquet, took him to Paris to present him to the Superintendent himself.

This journey and presentation decided La Fontaine's fate. Touquet took a liking to him, attached him to himself, and gave him a salary of one thousand francs on condition of his producing every quarter a piece of poetry, ballad or madrigal, *distain* or *sixain*. These little pieces with the *Songe de Vaux* [Vaux being Fouquet's country-seat] are the first original productions of La Fontaine that we possess; they belong wholly to the taste of that day, the taste of Saint-Évremond and Benserade, and to the *marotisme* of Sarasin and Voiture; but the inexpressible *something* of easy indolence and voluptuous revery characteristic of the delightful writer is already perceptible, though much overloaded with insipidity and *bel esprit*.

Fouquet's poet was greeted from his start in Paris as one of the most delicate ornaments of the polished and gallant society of Saint-Mandé and Vaux. He was very agreeable in company, especially that of private life; his conversation, free, easy, and naïve, was seasoned now and then with roguish wit, his absence of mind being checked in time to be only a charm the more. He was certainly less of the *good-man* in society than Corneille. Women, slumber, and the art of doing nothing shared in turn his homage and his devotion. He boasted of this sometimes, and talked readily of himself and his tastes to others without ever wearying them, though making them smile. Intimacy, especially, brought out his charm; he gave it an affectionate turn, a tone of familiar good-breed-

ing: he let himself go to it like a man who forgets all else, and who takes seriously or with easy jesting every passing caprice. His acknowledged liking for the fair sex did not make him dangerous to women unless they wished it. In fact La Fontaine, like Regnier, his predecessor, liked best all "easy and little-defended loves." While he was addressing Climène, Iris, and the goddesses, on his knees with respectful sighs, employing what he thought he had learned from Plato, he was seeking elsewhere, and far lower, for less mystical pleasures which helped him to bear his fictitious martyrdom with patience. Among his *bonnes fortunes* soon after his arrival in Paris was the celebrated Claudine, third wife of Guillaume Colletet and his cook (Colletet always married his servant-women). Our poet often visited the good old rhymers at his house in the Faubourg Saint-Marceau, and courted Claudine while discussing the authors of the sixteenth century at supper with her master, who could give him good counsel thereon and reveal to him riches by which he profited.

During the first six years of his residence in Paris and until the fall of Fouquet, La Fontaine produced little; he gave himself up wholly to the pleasures of a life of enchantment and festivity, to the delights of a choice society which enjoyed his ingenuous talk, and appreciated his gallant trifling. But this dream vanished on the downfall of the enchanter. Matters were thus, when, the Duchesse de Bouillon, niece

of Mazarin, having asked the poet for some tales in verse, he hastened to satisfy her, and the first collection of *Contes* appeared in 1664. La Fontaine was then forty-four years old. Critics have sought to explain this tardy first appearance of so facile a genius; and some have gone so far as to attribute his long silence to secret studies, to a laborious and prolonged education. But in truth, while La Fontaine never ceased testing and cultivating his talent in his leisure moments from the day Malherbe revealed it to him, I much prefer to believe in his laziness, his somnolence, his absent-mindedness, all, in short, that was naïve and forgetful in him, rather than admit that he ever went through the wearisome novitiate to which those critics have condemned him. Instinctive, heedless genius, fickle, volatile, ever the sport of circumstances, we have only to recall certain features of his life to know him and comprehend him: On leaving college, a canon of Soissons lends him a pious book—behold him in the seminary; an officer reads him an ode of Malherbe, and lo! he is a poet; Pintrel and Maucroix turn him to antiquity, and he dreams of Quintilian and dotes on Plato while awaiting Baruch; Fouquet orders *dixains* and ballads, and he makes them; the Duchesse de Bouillon, tales, and he tells them; another day it is fables for Monseigneur the dauphin, a poem on quinine for Mme. de Bouillon; again, an opera of *Daphne* for Lulli, the *Captivité de Saint-Malc* at the request of Port-Royal; or else it

may be letters, long, flowery, negligent letters, mixtures of verse and prose, to his wife, to M. de Maucroix, to Saint-Évremond, to the Contis, to the Vendômes, to all, in short, who demand them. La Fontaine spent his genius, as he did his time and his fortune, without knowing how, and in the service of every one. If up to the age of forty he seems less prolific than he was later, it is because occasions were lacking to him, and his natural laziness needed to be overcome by gentle violence from without. No sooner did he meet at forty-three years of age with the style and manner that suited him—that of *conte* and *fable*—than it was quite natural he should give himself to it with a sort of effusion, and return to it again and again, of his own accord, from liking as well as from habit.

La Fontaine, it is true, was, in some respects, a little mistaken about his gifts; he piqued himself much on correction and labour; and his poetic art, which he mainly derived from Maucroix, and which Boileau and Racine completed for him, accorded ill with the natural character of his work. But this slight inconsistency, which he has in common with other great, ingenuous minds of his day, is not surprising in him, and confirms, far more than it contradicts, the opinion I have of the facile and accommodating nature of his genius.

What La Fontaine is in *tale*, all the world knows; what he is in *fable*, the world also knows and feels;

but it is much less easy to explain it. Authors of intelligence have tried the same style and failed; they have put in action, according to precept, animals, trees, men; hiding a sly meaning, a healthy moral under their little dramas; and then, to their surprise, they are judged inferior to their illustrious predecessor. The reason is that La Fontaine understood Fable in a different way. I except his first books, in which he shows timidity, holds closer to his little tale, and is not yet wholly at his ease in this form, which adapted itself less immediately to his mind than did the elegy or the *conte*. When the second collection appeared, containing five books (from the sixth to the eleventh included), contemporary critics cried out, as they always do, that it was much below the first. Yet it is in that collection that we find, in its perfection, Fable, such as La Fontaine invented it. He had ended, evidently, by finding in it a framework suited to thoughts, to sentiments, and to *talk*; the little drama at the base is made more important than before; the moral, four lines at the end, is still there from force of habit, but the Fable, freer in its course, turns and gathers on its way, now from elegy or idyll, anon from epistle or tale, here an anecdote, there a conversation, a theme rising to fancy—a mixture of charming avowals, gentle philosophies, and dreamy complaints.

Nevertheless, in his first manner, at the close of the first book, in the *Chêne et le Roseau*, he attained the perfection of the Fable, properly so-called; he found

means to introduce into it grandeur and the higher poesy, without exceeding its limits by an iota; he was master already. In *Le Meunier, son Fils et l'Âne*, he jokes, he talks, he makes the masters, Malherbe and Racan, talk, and the apologue is merely an adornment of the discourse. But his second manner begins more distinctly and declares itself, as I have said, in the second collection, seventh book, which opens with the fable of the animals ill of the plague. In his preface the poet himself acknowledges that he has diverged a little from the pure fable of Æsop, and has "sought for other enrichment and has extended farther the circumstances of his tale."

When we take up the seventh book of the Fables and read it consecutively, we are enraptured; it has truly "a charm," as the poet says in his Dedication; little masterpieces succeed one another: *Le Coche et la Mouche*, *La Laitière et le Pot au lait*, *Le Curé et le Mort*; scarcely one that we can call mediocre steps in (such as *La Tête et Queue du Serpent*). The Fable that ends Book VII, *Un Animal dans la Lune*, discloses in La Fontaine a philosophical faculty that his native *naïveté* would scarcely allow us to suspect; the simple man, who might be thought credulous when you argued with him, because he always had an air of listening to your reasons without thinking to give you his, proves a rival of Lucretius and of that élite of great poets who have thought. He treats of things of Nature with elevation of mind and firmness. In

the physical world, not less than in the moral world, appearances do not mislead him. Speaking of the sun, he says in language that Copernicus or Galileo would not disavow:

“I see the sun: what figure doth it bear?
 Its great mass here below seems scarce three feet;
 But did I see it at its own great height,
 ’T would seem to my eyes like the Eye of Nature.
 Distance enables me to judge its size,
 By angle and by outline I determine it:
 Ignorance thinks it flat; but round I deem it;
 I make it motionless; ’t is earth that moves.”

Pascal himself, geometrician that he was, would not have dared to say more on the movement of the earth. Again, in his Fable of *Démocrate et les Abdéritains*, his thought is far above vulgar prejudices. No one in his day refuted more wittily than he Descartes and the Cartesians on the souls of animals, and those pretended mechanisms which the haughty philosopher knew no better than he knew the human being he flattered himself he explained. In the Fable, *Les deux Rats, le Renard et l'Œuf*, addressed to Mme. de La Sablière, La Fontaine discusses and reasons on these subtle matters; he even offers his own explanation, but, wise man that he is, he is careful not to venture a conclusion. In *Les Souris et le Chat-Huant* he returns to that philosophic subject; in *Les Lapins*, addressed to M. de La Rochefoucauld, he returns again and argues it, but he enlivens his arguments with gaiety

after his fashion, sending through them, as it were, a fragrance of heather and of thyme.

At the end of the fable, *Un Animal dans la Lune*, La Fontaine enlarges on the happiness of England, which was then escaping the risks of war; and in speaking of that first, full glory of Louis XIV, he gives voice to words of peace; he does it with delicacy and recognition of the exploits of the monarch, admitting that "peace is our desire, though not our prayer." Whenever he has to speak of the masters of earth, of the Lion, which represents them in his Fables, La Fontaine shows plainly that he is neither seduced nor dazzled by them. But in all that he has written against monarchs and lions it would be a mistake to conclude that he did it with a purpose, or was hostile to them in any way. To interpret him thus would be narrow and unpoetic; if, speaking of the great and the powerful, he did not withhold the lesson that escapes him, still less did he intend to flatter the people, that people of Athens that he somewhere calls an "animal with frivolous heads."

I shall not presume here to classify La Fontaine's Fables; it would be to misunderstand their spirit and hamper their diversity. But foremost in the order of beauty we must place those grand moral fables, *Le Berger et le Roi* and *Le Paysan du Danube*, in which there is an eloquent sentiment of history and almost of statesmanship. Next come other fables which, taken together, form a complete picture, a rounded

whole, and are equally full of philosophy: *Le Vieillard et les trois Jeunes Hommes*; *Le Savetier et le Financier*; the latter as perfect in itself as some grand scene, some compact comedy of Molière. There are elegies, properly so-called, such as: *Tircés et Amarante*, and other elegies less direct but more enchanting,—*Les Deux Pigeons*, for example.

Though human nature is often treated with severity by La Fontaine, though he flatters the species in no way, though he says that childhood is “without pity,” and that old age is “pitiless,” still, in spite of all, he is not the calumniator of mankind; on the contrary, he will ever remain its consoler in one respect, namely: that friendship has found in him so constant and so tender an interpreter. His *Deux Amis* is the masterpiece of that topic; but on all the other occasions when he speaks of friendship, his heart opens, his mocking observation dies; he has words of feeling that he feels, tones either tender or generous, as when he lauds in Mme. d’Hervart

“Nobility of soul, the talent to conduct
 Affairs and men;
 A temper frank and free, the gift to be a friend
 In spite of Jupiter and stormy skies.”

It is when we have read in a single day a chosen quantity of La Fontaine’s Fables that we feel our admiration for him renewed and refreshed, and that we say with an eminent critic [Joubert], “There is in

La Fontaine a plenitude of poesy that is found nowhere else among French authors."

La Fontaine is our only great personal, pensive, musing poet before André Chénier. He puts himself knowingly into his verse, he tells us about himself, his soul, his caprices, his weaknesses. Usually his tone breathes gaiety, roguish malice, mischief, and the jolly *conteur* laughs to us from the corner of his eye, wagging his head. But often, also, he has tones that come from the heart, a melancholy tenderness that brings him close to the poets of our own time. Those of the sixteenth century had already had some foretaste of revery; but with them its individual inspiration was lacking. La Fontaine restored to it a primitive character of vivid and discreet expression; he freed it of all it had contracted of commonplace and sensual; on this side Plato did him the good he once did to Petrarch; and when La Fontaine exclaims in one of his delightful fables:

"Shall I feel no more the charm that holds me?
Have I passed the time to love?"

The word *charm*, thus employed in a sense indefinite and wholly metaphysical, marks a progress in French poesy that was, later, taken up and followed by André Chénier and his successors.

Friend of retirement, of solitude, and painter of the fields, La Fontaine has the additional advantage over his predecessors in the sixteenth century of giving to

his pictures faithful colours that render the region truly and, so to speak, the soil itself. Those vast plains of wheat, where the master walks early and the lark hides her nest; those bushes and copses and bracken where a whole little world is swarming; those pretty warrens, whose giddy inhabitants pay court to Aurora in the dew and perfume their banquet with thyme — all is Beauce, Champagne, Picardy; I recognise the farms with their ponds, their poultry yards, their dove-cotes. La Fontaine had well observed those regions, if not as Director of Waters and Forests, at least as poet. He was born there, he lived there long; and even after he was settled in Paris he returned every autumn to Château Thierry to visit his property and sell it piecemeal, for Jean, as we know, “spent capital and revenue.”

When all La Fontaine's property was dissipated, and the sudden death of Madame [Henriette, Duchesse d'Orléans] deprived him of the office of gentleman-in-waiting which he held in her household, Mme. de La Sablière invited him to her house and took care of him for twenty years. Abandoned in his habits, ruined in fortune, without abode or hearth, it was for him and for his genius an inestimable blessing to find himself maintained, under the auspices of an amiable woman, in the heart of a witty and well-bred society, and with all the comforts of opulence. He keenly felt the value of this benefit; and his inviolable friendship, familiar yet respectful, which death alone could

break, is one of the natural sentiments he succeeded best in expressing.

At the feet of Mme. de La Sablière and of other distinguished women whom he celebrated and respected, his muse, soiled at times, resumed a sort of purity and freshness, which his rather vulgar tastes, growing less and less scrupulous with age, tended too much to weaken. His life, thus orderly amid disorder, became dual; he made it into two parts: one elegant, animated, intelligent, and open to the light; the other obscure and, it must be said, shameful, given over to those prolonged dissipations which youth embellishes with the name of "pleasures," but which are vices on the forehead of old age. Mme. de La Sablière herself, who rebuked La Fontaine, had not always been exempt from human passions and frailties; but when the unfaithfulness of the Marquis de La Fare left her heart free and empty, she felt that no other than God could henceforth fill it, and she devoted her last years to the most active exercise of Christian charity. This conversion, as sincere as it was glittering, took place in 1683. La Fontaine was moved to think it an example he ought to follow; his frailty, and other intimacies that he contracted about that time, deterred him; and it was not until ten years later, when the death of Mme. de La Sablière gave him a second and solemn warning, that this seed of good thoughts sprang up within him to wilt no more. But, even in 1684, the year after her conversion, he

wrote an admirable *Discours en Vers*, which he read before the French Academy on the day of his reception, in which, addressing his benefactress, he shows her with candid truth the state of his soul:

“Of solid joys I follow but the shadow;
 I have abused the dearest of our boons—
 Amusing thoughts, gay dreams, and vague discourses,
 Delights chimerical, vain fruits of leisure,
 Novels and cards, the curse of all republics,
 By which e’en upright minds may be misled,
 A foolish madness scoffing at the laws,
 With other passions by wise men condemned,
 Have plucked, like thieves, the flower of my years.
 To seek true good would still repair these ills;
 I know it—yet I turn to false gods ever.”

This is, as we see, a grave, ingenuous confession, in which religious unction and lofty morality do not quite prevent a lingering, loving glance toward those “chimerical delights” from which he was ill-detached. A simplicity of exaggeration enters into it; novels and cards that entice the sinner are “the curse of republics, a madness that laughs at laws”!

“What profit in these lines with care composed?
 Need I no other fruit than praise for them?
 Little their counsels if I heed them not,
 And, at the close of life, do not begin to live.—
 For live I have not; I have served two masters,
 An empty fame and love have filled my years.
 What, then, is living? Iris, you could tell me!
 Your answer promptly comes; I seem to hear it:
 ‘Enjoy true good in sweet tranquillity,
 Make use of time, and of thy leisure hours;
 Pay honour where ’t is due—to God alone;

Renounce thy Phyllises in favour of thyself;
Banish those foolish loves, those impotent desires,
Like Hydras in our hearts incessantly reborn.' ”

Sincere, eloquent, sublime poesy, of a singular turn, where virtue contrives to make terms with idleness, where Phyllis and the Supreme Being are side by side; poesy that gives birth to a smile in a tear! Alas! why did La Fontaine never know the “God of good men”? It would have cost him less to be converted.

At first sight, and judging only by his works, art and labour seem to have had but little place in La Fontaine, and if the attention of critics had not been awakened on this point by a few words in his prefaces, and by certain contemporaneous testimony, we should probably never have thought of making a question of it. But the poet “confesses” in the preface to *Psyche* that “prose costs him as much trouble as poesy.” In one of his last Fables, written for the Duc de Bourgogne, he complains of “manufacturing under stress of time” verses that have less sense than the prose of the young prince. His manuscripts are full of erasures and changes; the same pieces are copied several times, and often with very happy alterations. It is amusing to see the care that he gives to errata. “Several errors in printing have slipped in,” he says in the preface to his second collection: “I have made them make an errata, but that is a small remedy for a considerable defect. If the reader is to have any pleasure

in this work he must correct those errors with his own hand in his copy according as they are given in each erratum, as much for the first two parts as for the last."

La Fontaine read much, not only the moderns, French and Italian, but the classics, in the original or in translation; he plumes himself repeatedly upon it. His erudition, however, makes singular blunders and is charmingly confused in places. In his *Vie d'Esop* he says: "As Planude lived in a century when the memory of things that happened to Æsop had not yet faded, I think he knew by tradition what the latter left behind him." In writing thus he forgot that nineteen centuries had elapsed between the Phrygian and his editor, and that the Greek monk lived barely two centuries before the reign of Louis the Great. In an epistle to Huet in favour of the ancients over the moderns, and in special honour of Quintilian, he reverts to Plato, his favourite topic, and declares that among modern sages not one can approach that great philosopher:

"All Greece is swarming in his smallest corner."

He attributes the decadence of the ode in France to a cause that one would never have imagined:

" . . . the ode, which doth expire,
Needs patience, and our men have only fire."

In this remarkable epistle he protests against servile imitation of the ancients, and tries to explain the

nature of his own imitation. I advise all those who are curious in such matters to compare this passage with the end of the second epistle of André Chénier; the idea at bottom is the same, but the reader will see, on comparing the two expressions of it, the profound difference that separated a poet-artist like Chénier from a poet of instinct like La Fontaine.

That which is true up to this time of nearly all our poets except Molière and perhaps Corneille,—that which is true of Marot, Ronsard, Regnier, Malherbe, Boileau, Racine, and André Chénier,—is true also of La Fontaine: when we have surveyed his various merits we must end by saying that it is in style that he excels. With Molière, on the contrary, with Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, the style equals the invention, no doubt, but never surpasses it; the manner of utterance reflects the depths below, but never eclipses them. As to La Fontaine's special manner, it is too well known and too well analysed elsewhere for me to recur to it here. Let it suffice to remark that there is in it quite a large admixture of gallant insipidities and false pastoral taste, which we should blame in Saint-Évremond and Voiture, but which we love in La Fontaine. In fact, those insipidities and that false taste cease to exist from the moment that they flow from his bewitching pen. La Fontaine needs longer breath and more consecutiveness in his compositions; he has, as he goes along, frequent distractions which hamper his style and swerve his thought; his delicious

verses, flowing like a rivulet, slumber at times, or they wander away and lose themselves; but that, in itself, constitutes a manner; and it is with that manner, as with those of all men of genius,—what would elsewhere seem poor and even bad, in them becomes a trait of character or a piquant grace.

The conversion of Mme. de La Sablière, which La Fontaine had not the courage to imitate, left him solitary and unoccupied. He continued to live in her house; but she no longer received the company of other days, and she absented herself frequently to visit the poor and the sick. It was then, more especially, that, to relieve his tedium, he gave himself up to the society of the Prince de Conti and of MM. de Vendôme, whose morals we all know; and thus, without losing any of his powers of mind, he exposed to the eyes of every one a cynical and dissolute old age, ill-disguised under the roses of Anacreon. Maucroix, Racine, and his true friends were grieved at such licence without excuse; the austere Boileau ceased to see him. Saint-Évremond, who tried to attract him to England and to the Duchesse de Mazarin, received from Ninon a letter in which she said: “I have heard that you are wishing for La Fontaine in England; here, in Paris, people enjoy him no longer; his head is much weakened. That is the fate of poets: Tasso and Lucretius met with it. I doubt if there is any philter of love for La Fontaine; he has never loved women who could pay the cost.”

La Fontaine's head was not weakened as Ninon thought; but what she says of his vile loves is only too true; he often received from the Abbé de Chaulieu gifts of money of which he made a melancholy use. Fortunately, a rich and beautiful young woman, Mme. d'Hervart, attached herself to the poet, offered him the attractions of her house, and became to him, by care and kind attention, a second La Sablière. At the death of the latter, she took the old man to her home and surrounded him with friendship to his last moments. It was in that home that the writer of *Joconde*, brought at last to repentance, put on the sackcloth and ashes he never again put off. The details of that repentance are touching: La Fontaine consecrated it publicly by a translation of the *Dies Iræ*, which he read before the Academy, and he formed the design of paraphrasing the Psalms before he died.

But, apart from the chilling of old age and sickness, we may doubt if that task, often attempted by repentant poets, would have been possible to La Fontaine, or to any one else in those days. At that epoch of ruling and traditional beliefs, it was the senses, not the reason, that led men astray: they had been licentious, they made themselves devout; they had passed through no philosophical pride or arid impiety; they did not linger in the regions of doubt, they were not made to feel a hundred times their failure in the search for truth. The senses charmed the soul for

themselves, for their own sake, and not as a bewildering and fiery emotion, not from ennui or despair. Then, when licence and errors were exhausted, and men returned to the one supreme truth, they found a haven all ready for them, a confessional, an oratory, a hair-shirt that subdued the flesh; they were not, as in our day, pursued into the very bosom of reviving faith by fearsome doubts, eternal obscurities, and an abyss ever yawning:—I am wrong; there was one man, even in those days, who experienced all this and it well-nigh drove him mad: that man was Pascal.

VI.

Pascal.

VI.

Pascal.

IN writing a few pages upon Pascal, I am under the disadvantage of having formerly written a large volume (*Histoire de Port-Royal*) of which he was, almost exclusively, the subject. I shall endeavour, in speaking on this occasion of a book that ranks among our classics, to forget what I have hitherto written of it that was too minute for my present purpose, and limit myself here to what is likely to interest the generality of readers.

Pascal had a great mind, and a great heart — which great minds do not always have; and all that he has done in the domain of mind and the domain of heart bears a stamp of invention and of originality which testifies to strength, profundity, and an ardent, even rabid, pursuit of truth. Born in 1623, of a family full of intelligence and virtue, brought up without close restraint by a father who was himself a superior man, he had received great gifts from Nature; a special genius for mathematical calculations and concepts, and an exquisite moral sensibility which made him passionate for good and against evil, eager for happiness, but a happiness that was noble and everlasting. His dis-

coveries in childhood are famous; wherever he turned his eyes he sought and found something new; it was easier to him to find for himself than to study from others. His youth escaped the frivolities and licence which are its usual perils; his nature, however, was very capable of storms; he had them, those storms, and he spent their force in the sphere of knowledge, but, above all, in that of religious sentiment.

His excess of intellectual toil had early made him subject to a singular nervous malady, which still further developed a naturally keen sensibility. His meeting with the gentlemen of Port-Royal furnished food for his moral activity, and their doctrine, which was something new and bold, became to him a point of departure, whence he sprang forward with his native originality towards a complete reconstruction of the moral and religious world. A Christian, sincere and impassioned, he conceived an apology, a defence of religion by a method and by reasons that no one had so far found, but which, as he believed, would carry defeat to the very heart of unbelief. At thirty-five years of age he turned to this work with the fire and precision that he put into everything; new and more serious disorders appearing in his health prevented its steady execution; but he returned to it in every interval of his sufferings; and he cast on paper his ideas, his perceptions, his inspirations. Dying at thirty-eight years of age, in 1662, he could not put them into order as a whole, and his *Pensées sur la Religion* did



BLAISE PASCAL.
From a steel engraving.

not appear till seven or eight years later, under the care of his family and friends.

What was that first edition of the *Pensées*? What must it have been? We can easily conceive it, even if the original manuscripts were not in existence to show it. The first edition did not contain all that Pascal left; only the principal parts were given; and of those, scruples of various kinds, either of doctrine or of grammar, caused corrections, modifications, explanations in certain places, where the excitability and impatience of the author were shown in statements too brusque, or too concise, or in a decisive manner, which on such subjects might be compromising.

In the eighteenth century Voltaire and Condorcet seized upon some of Pascal's *Pensées* very much as in war-time generals try to profit by the premature advance of an audacious and rash enemy. Pascal was audacious only, he was not rash; but since I have compared him to a general, I will add that he was a general. Killed in the very moment of his enterprise, it was left unfinished, and in part unprotected.

In our day, by restoring Pascal's true text, giving his sentences in all their simplicity, their firm and precise beauty, their boldness in challenging, and their familiarity, which is sometimes singular, we are brought back to a point of view that is far more just, and in no way hostile. M. Cousin was the first to suggest (in 1843) the work of completely restoring Pascal; M. Fougère has the merit of executing it in

1844. Thanks to him, we now have Pascal's *Pensées* in precise conformity with the original manuscripts. This is the text that a young professor, M. Havet, has just published, surrounding it with much necessary help in the way of explanations, comparisons, and commentaries; he has given us a learned edition, truly classic, in the best acceptance of that word.

Being unable, in this essay, to enter fully into an examination of Pascal's method, I wish merely to insist on a single point, and show how, in spite of all changes that have come about in the world and in ideas, in spite of the repugnance that is more and more caused by certain views peculiar to the author of the *Pensées*, we are to-day in a better position to sympathise with Pascal than they were in the days of Voltaire; that which shocked Voltaire shocks us much less than the beautiful and heartfelt parts, which are one whole side of him, touch and transport us.

It is because Pascal is not merely a reasoner, a man who presses his adversary closely from every direction, who flings a challenge to him on all the points that are commonly the pride and glory of the understanding; he is at the same time a soul that suffers; he has felt, and he expresses, in himself, the struggle and the agony.

There were unbelievers in Pascal's time; the sixteenth century gave birth to quite a number, especially among the lettered classes; these were pagans, more or less sceptical, of whom Montaigne is for us the

gracious type, and we see the race continued in Charon, La Mothe Le Vayer, and Gabriel-Naudé. But these men of doubt and erudition, or others, the mere libertines of wit and society, such as Théophile and Des Barreaux, took things little to heart. Whether they persevered in their unbelief, or were converted in the hour of death, we feel in none of them that deep uneasiness that marks a moral nature of a high order, and an intellectual nature sealed with the signet of the Archangel: in a word, and to speak after the manner of Plato, they are not royal natures. Pascal is of that primal and glorious race; he has upon his heart and on his brow more than one sign of it; he is one of the noblest of mortals, but he is ill, he seeks a cure. He was the first to bring to the defence of religion the ardour, the anguish, the lofty melancholy that others have since carried into scepticism.

“I blame equally,” he says, “those who take the side of praising man, those who take the other side of condemning him, and those who merely divert themselves; I can approve of those only who *seek with groans.*”

The method he employs in his *Pensées* to combat unbelief, and, above all, to stir the indifferent and put desire into their hearts, is full of originality and unexpectedness. We know how he starts. He takes man in the midst of nature, in the bosom of the infinite; he considers him, by turns, in his relation to the immensity of the heavens and in his relation to atoms;

he shows him alternately grand and petty, suspended between two infinities, two abysses. The French language has no finer pages than the simple and severe lines of that incomparable picture. Then, following man within himself, as he has followed him without, he strives to show that in the soul are two abysses, one straining upward towards God, towards a noble morality, a movement of return to man's illustrious origin; on the other a descent, an abasement towards evil, a sort of criminal attraction towards vice. That is, undoubtedly, the Christian idea of original corruption and the Fall; but by the manner in which Pascal lays hold of it he makes it his own in a way, so far and so hard does he drive it to a conclusion: he makes man in the beginning a monster, a chimera, something incomprehensible; he forms the knot and ties it indissolubly, in order that God alone, descending upon it like a sword, can cut it.

To vary my reading of Pascal, I have given myself the satisfaction of re-reading, side by side, certain pages of Bossuet and Fénelon. I took Fénelon in his treatise on the *Existence de Dieu*, and Bossuet in his treatise on the *Connaissance de Dieu et de Soi-même*; and without seeking to fathom the difference (if there be any) in doctrine, I have felt, more especially, the difference in their value and their genius.

Fénelon, as we know, begins by obtaining his proofs of the existence of God from the general aspect

of the universe, from the spectacle of the wonders that start forth in all orders—the stars, the various elements, the structure of the human body; all are to him a path by which to rise to the contemplation of the work, and to admiration of the art and knowledge of the workman. There is a plan, there are laws, therefore there must be an architect and a legislator. There are defined purposes, therefore there must be a supreme intention. After accepting with confidence this method of interpretation by external things, and the demonstration of God by Nature, Fénelon, in the second part of his treatise, takes up another class of proofs; he admits philosophic doubts on things external, and turns inward to man's self, reaching the same end by another road, and demonstrating God by the very nature of our ideas. But, while admitting the universal doubt of philosophers, he is not alarmed by the state of things; he describes it slowly, almost kindly; he is neither hurried, nor impatient, nor distressed, like Pascal; he is not what Pascal in his researches seems to us at first sight to be—a bewildered traveller longing for shelter, who, lost without a guide in a dark forest, takes many a wrong path, returns upon his steps discouraged, sits down at a crossways in the forest, utters cries that no one answers, starts again in grief and frenzy, and, still lost, flings himself to earth, wanting to die, and attains his goal at last through terror and bloody sweat.

Fénelon has nothing of all this in his easy, gradual, circumspect advance. It is very true that at the moment when he asks himself whether all Nature is not a phantom, an illusion of the senses, and when, to be logical, he assumes this supposition of absolute doubt—it is very true that he says to himself: “This state of suspension surprises and alarms me; it casts me into my inward self, into a deep solitude that is full of horror; it impedes me, it holds me, as it were, in air; it cannot last, I know that; but it is the only reasonable state.”

At the moment when he says that, we feel very plainly, by the manner in which he speaks and his levity of expression, that he is not seriously alarmed. A little farther on, addressing reason and apostrophising it, he asks it: “How long shall I remain in this doubt, which is a species of torture, and yet is the only use I can make of reason?” This doubt, which is a “species of torture” for Fénelon, is never admitted as a gratuitous supposition by Pascal; it is its reality that seems to him cruel torture, the most revolting and intolerable to Nature itself. Fénelon, in putting himself into this state of doubt under the example of Descartes, makes sure previously of his own existence and the certainty of several primary ideas. He continues in this path of broad, agreeable, and easy deduction, mingled here and there with little gusts of affection, but without storms. We feel, as we read him, an airy, angelic nature, which has only

to let itself go, and it will rise of itself to its celestial origin. The whole is crowned by a prayer addressed to a God who is, above all else, infinite and kind; a God to whom he abandons himself with confidence, even if at times his words deny it: "Pardon my errors, O Kindness, that is not less infinite than all the other perfections of my God; pardon the stammerings of a tongue which cannot abstain from lauding thee, and the failures of a mind that thou hast made to admire thy perfection."

Nothing can be less like Pascal's method than this smooth and easy way. Nowhere do we hear the cry of distress; Fénelon, in adoring the Cross, never clings to it, like Pascal, as to a mast in shipwreck.

Pascal, in the first place, begins by rejecting all proofs drawn from Nature of the existence of God: "I admire," he says ironically, "the boldness with which these persons undertake to speak of God, addressing their discourse to unbelievers. Their first chapter is to prove Divinity by the works of Nature." Continuing to develop his thought, he insists that such discourse, tending to demonstrate God from natural works, can have their true effect only on the faithful, and on those who already worship him. As for the others, the indifferent, and those who are destitute of living faith and grace,

"to say to these that they have only to look at the least things that surround them and they will see God plainly, and to point them, for all proof on this great and important subject, to the course of the

moon or the planets is to give them good reason to think that the proofs of our religion are very weak; and I see, by reason and from experience, that nothing is more fitted to give birth to contempt."

We can judge clearly from that passage to what point Pascal neglected and even rejected with disdain all semi-proof; and yet in this he shows himself more critical than Scripture, which says in a celebrated psalm, *Cœli enarrant gloriam Dei*: "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the firmament showeth his handiwork." It is curious to notice that Pascal's rather contemptuous sentence: "I admire the boldness with which," etc., was printed in the first edition of his *Pensées*, and the Bibliothèque Nationale possesses a unique copy, dated 1669, in which the sentence appears verbatim. But presently friends, or the examiners and censors of the book, alarmed at so exclusive a proceeding, which was actually in contradiction to Holy Scripture, cancelled that passage before the book was offered for sale; they softened the language, and presented Pascal's idea with a precaution that that vigorous writer never took, even with regard to his friends and auxiliaries. The only point on which I desire to insist here, is the open opposition of Pascal to what was soon to be Fénelon's method. Fénelon, serene, confident, and without anxiety, beholds the wonderful system of the starry night, and says with the Magi, or the Prophet, or the Chaldean shepherd: "How almighty and wise must he be who made worlds as innumerable as the sands

on the seashore, and who leads throughout the ages those wandering worlds as a shepherd his flock!" Pascal considers the same brilliant night, he feels beyond it a void that the geometrician cannot fill, and he cries out: "The eternal silence of that infinite space terrifies me." Like a wounded eagle he flies from the sun, and seeks, without attaining, a new and eternal dawn. His plaint and his terror come of finding nought but silence and night.

With Bossuet the contrast of method is not so striking. Even if, in his treatise on *Le Connaissance de Dieu*, the great prelate were not addressing his pupil, the young dauphin, if he spoke to any reader whatever, he would not write otherwise than as he does. Bossuet takes the pen, and states with lofty tranquillity the points of doctrine — the dual nature of man, his noble origin, the excellence and the immortality of the spiritual principle within him, his direct linking with God. Bossuet lectures like a truly great bishop, seated in his pulpit and leaning on it. He is not an anxious, sorrowful soul in search of something; he is a master, indicating and warranting the way. He demonstrates and develops the whole line of his discourse and conception without contest or effort. He makes no struggle to prove; in a way, he only recognises and promulgates the things of the spirit, like a man convinced who has not fought inward battles for a length of time; he speaks as a man of all authorities and all stabilities, who takes pleasure

in beholding order everywhere, or in re-establishing it instantly, by his speech. Pascal insists on the discord and disorder inherent, as he thinks, in all nature. Where the one extends and develops the august advance of his instruction, the other exhibits his wounds and his blood; but in all that Pascal has which is overstrained and excessive, he is like ourselves, and he touches us.

Not that Pascal puts himself completely on a par with those he reclaims and directs. Without being either bishop or priest, he is sure of his fact, he knows his object, he lets us see, plainly enough, his certainty, his scorn, his impatience; he chides, he jeers, he handles roughly whoso resists or does not understand him; then, all of a sudden, charity or natural frankness gets the better of him; his despotic airs cease; he speaks in his own name, and in the name of all; he associates himself with the soul in trouble, making it his living image and ours also.

Bossuet does not reject the light or the help of ancient philosophy; he never insults it; according to him, all that moves onward to the idea of the intellectual and spiritual life, all that aids the exercise and development of that higher portion of ourselves by which we are allied to the Supreme Being—all is good; and every time our "illustrious truth" is made apparent to us, we gain a foretaste of that higher existence to which the reasoning human creature is predestined. Bossuet, in his magnificent language,

loves to associate himself, to unite himself with great names; to link, as it were, a golden chain by which the human understanding can attain to the highest summits. I must quote one passage of sovereign beauty:

“He who beholds Pythagoras transported at having found the squares of the sides of a certain triangle with the square of its base, and sacrificing a hecatomb in thank-offerings;—he who beholds Archimedes, watchful of every new discovery, forgetting to eat or drink;—he who sees Plato extolling the happiness of those who contemplate the good and the beautiful, first in the arts, then in nature, and lastly in their source and essence, which is God;—he who sees Aristotle lauding those happy moments when the soul is possessed solely by the perception of Truth, judging such life to be the only one worthy to be eternal, the life of God;—but (above all) he who sees all saintly persons so transported with this divine exercise of knowing, praising, and loving God that they never quit it, and, in order to continue it, extinguish throughout the whole course of their lives every sensual desire;—whoso, I say, sees all these things, recognizes in their intellectual operations the principle and the exercise of the blessed eternal life.”

That which carries Bossuet to God is the principle of human grandeur rather than the sentiment of man's misery. His contemplation rises gradually from truth to truth, it does not bend incessantly over each abyss. In the above words he has painted for us a spiritual enjoyment of the first order, which, beginning with Pythagoras and Archimedes, and passing Aristotle, rises to the saints on earth; he, himself, viewing him in this example, seems only to have mounted one step more to the altar.

Pascal never proceeds thus. He holds to marking

distinctly, in an insuperable manner, the differences of the spheres. He refuses to see what there was of gradual advancement towards Christianity in the ancient philosophies. The learned and reasonable d'Aqueseau said, in the plan of a work he proposed to make from the *Pensées*: "If any one should undertake to make actual use of the *Pensées* of M. Pascal, he would have to rectify in many places the imperfect ideas he gives of pagan philosophy; true religion does not need to attribute to its adversaries or its rivals defects they have not." Brought into comparison with Bossuet, Pascal may at first sight show a harshness and narrowness of doctrine that shock us. Not content to believe with Bossuet and Fénelon, and all other Christians, in an unseen God, he wants to insist on the mysterious nature of that obscurity; he takes pleasure in expressly declaring that God "has chosen to blind some and enlighten others." At times he "obstinately strikes" (I use his own words) on rocks which it would be much wiser, from reason and even from faith, to go round, rather than discover and denounce them. He says, for example, of the prophecies quoted in the Gospels: "You believe they are quoted to make you believe—No, it is to prevent you from believing." He says of miracles: "Miracles do not serve to convert, but to condemn." Like a too intrepid guide in mountain climbing, he skirts intentionally the precipices and crevasses; one would think he was braving vertigo.

Pascal, unlike Bossuet, has an affection for small churches, little flocks of the elect, which leads in the end to sect. "I like," he says, "worshippers unknown to every one and to the Prophets themselves." But, beside and through the hard asperities of his way, what piercing words! what cries that move us! what truths felt by all who suffer, all who desire, all who have lost and then refound the way, never willing to despair of it! "It is good," he cries, "to be tired and weary from the fruitless search for the true good, for then we stretch out our arms to the Liberator." No one has ever made it better felt than Pascal what faith is, perfect faith, "God felt in the heart, and not by reason." "What distance there is," he says, "between the knowledge of God and loving him!"

This affectionate side of Pascal, in breaking through what is sour and stern in his doctrine and methods, has all the more charm and empire. The emotional manner in which that great, suffering, and praying spirit speaks to us of what is most private in religion, of Jesus Christ in person, is fitted to win all hearts, to inspire them with deep, mysterious feeling, and impress upon them for ever a tender respect. We may remain sceptical after reading Pascal, but we find it not permissible to jest or to blaspheme; and, in that sense, it is true that he has vanquished, on one whole side, the spirit of the eighteenth century and of Voltaire.

In a fragment, lately published for the first time,

Pascal meditates on the death of Jesus Christ; on the tortures which that soul, absolutely heroic and firm when it chooses to be so, inflicted on itself in the name and for the sake of all men; and in these few verses, alternately of meditation and of prayer, Pascal penetrates into the mystery of Christ's suffering with a passion, a tenderness, a piety to which no human soul can remain insensible. He supposes a dialogue, in which the divine Sufferer says to his disciple:

“ ‘ Console thyself; thou wouldst not seek me if thou hadst not found;—thou wouldst not seek me if thou didst not possess me; therefore, be not anxious.

“ ‘ I think of thee in my agony; I have shed my blood for thee. Wilt thou that the blood of my humanity be for ever shed whilst thou givest me no tears ? ’ ”

This writing should be read as a whole and in its place. Jean-Jacques Rousseau could not have heard it, I venture to believe, without breaking into sobs, and, perhaps, falling on his knees. It is by such pages, burning, passionate, in which the love divine is instinct with human charity, that Pascal has more hold upon us to-day than any writer of his time. In this trouble, this passion, this ardour, there is something that redeems his harshness and his extravagances of doctrine. Pascal is for us more violent than Bossuet, but more sympathetic; he is more our contemporary in feeling. We can read him on the same day that we read “ Childe Harold ” or “ Hamlet,” “ René ” or “ Werther,” and he holds his own against them; or, rather, he makes us comprehend and feel a moral

ideal and a beauty of heart that is lacking in all of them, and which, once perceived, is the despair of others. It is an honour to mankind to have despairs that come of such high objects.

Some searchers and erudites will continue to study Pascal; but the conclusion that to-day seems good and useful for simply serious minds and upright hearts, the counsel that I give them after a fresh reading of the *Pensées* in this last edition is not to attempt to penetrate too deeply into the personal and Jansenist Pascal; to be satisfied with divining him on that side and understanding him on certain essential points, and to limit themselves to the sight of the moral struggle, the storm and stress of that passion which he felt for Good, and for deserved happiness. Taking him thus, we can sufficiently resist his rather narrow, stubborn, and arbitrary logic; but our souls will open to that flame, that upward soaring, and to all else that is so tender and so generous in him; we shall grasp without difficulty the ideal of moral perfection which he embodies in Jesus Christ; we shall feel ourselves lifted up and purified in the hours we spend tête-à-tête with this athlete, this martyr, this hero of the invisible moral world — Pascal for us is all that.

The world goes on: it develops more and more in ways that seem the most opposed to those of Pascal; in the ways of practical self-interests, of physical nature trained and subdued, and of human triumphs through industry. It is well to find somewhere a

counterpoise; well that in some solitary chambers firm minds, generous, not bitter, and not assuming to protest against the movement of the age, should tell themselves what that age lacks, and in what way it might perfect and crown itself. Such reservoirs of high thoughts are necessary, that the habit of them be not wholly lost, and that the positive, the practical, may not consume the whole man. Human society, and, to take the clearest example, French society, seems to me sometimes like an indefatigable traveller, who takes his way and follows it under more than one costume, changing his name and coat repeatedly. Since '89 we stand on our feet and we walk: whither? who can say? but on we go, ceaselessly. Revolution, at the moment when, under one form, we thought it stopped, rises and appears under another: sometimes it wears the military uniform, sometimes the black coat of the deputy; yesterday it was the proletary, the day before it was the bourgeois. To-day it is industrial before all else; the engineer is he who has the right of way and who triumphs. Let us not complain, but, at the same time, let us remember that other part of ourselves, that part which was so long the most precious honour of humanity. Let us go to London, and visit and admire the Crystal Palace and its marvels; let us enrich it and add to its pride with our products — yes, but on the way, on our return, let us repeat these words, which should be carved upon its frontal:

“All bodies, the firmament, the stars, the earth and its kingdoms, are not equal in value to the lowest human mind; for that knows all things and itself, too; but the bodies know nothing. All bodies together, and all minds together, and all their productions are not equal in value to the smallest impulse of charity: that is of an order infinitely higher.

“From all bodies put together not the slightest little thought can be obtained; that is impossible, and is of another order. Of all bodies and minds not a single impulse of true charity can be obtained; that, too, is impossible, it is of another order, the supernatural.”

It is thus that Pascal expresses himself in his brief, curt *Pensées*, written for himself only, rather abrupt, and issuing with a gush, as it were, from the living spring.

VII.

Madame de Sévigné.

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THOSE critics, and especially foreign critics, who, in these latter days, have judged our two literary centuries with severity, agree in recognising their ruling qualities, qualities that were reflected by them in a thousand ways, which gave them their brilliancy and distinction, namely: the spirit of conversation and of society, knowledge of the world and of men, a quick, acute sense of proprieties and absurdities, subtle delicacy of sentiment, grace, piquancy, and a perfected politeness of language. And, in truth, it is there—with the reserves that we all make, and two or three names, like those of Bossuet and Montesquieu, understood—it is there that, until about the year 1789, the distinctive characteristics, the signal traits of French literature, among the other literatures of Europe, will be found. That glory, which has been made almost a reproach to our nation, is fruitful and beautiful enough for whoso knows how to understand and interpret it.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century our civilisation, and consequently our language and our literature, had nothing mature, nothing fixed. Europe,

issuing from the religious troubles and passing through the phases of the Thirty Years' War, was laboriously giving birth to a new political system; France, within her borders, was working off the remains of her civil discords. At Court, a few salons, a few *ruelles* [alcoves¹] of wits and *beaux-esprits* were already in vogue; but nothing was yet born of them that was great or original; people were fed to satiety on Spanish novels and the sonnets and pastorals of Italy. It was not until after Richelieu, after the Fronde, under the queen-mother and Mazarin, that suddenly, amid the fêtes of Saint-Mandé and Vaux, from the salon of the hôtel de Rambouillet or the antechambers of the young king, there issued, as if by miracle, three choice minds, three geniuses diversely endowed, but all three of pure and naïve taste, perfect simplicity, easy productiveness, fed by their own native graces and delicacies, and destined to open a brilliant era of glory, in which none have surpassed them.

Molière, La Fontaine, and Mme. de Sévigné belong to a literary generation which preceded that of which Racine and Boileau were the leaders, and they are distinguished from the latter by various traits, derived from the nature of their genius and the date of their coming. We feel, from the turn of their minds as much as by their circumstances, that they are nearer

¹ Social life went on chiefly in dark, half-furnished bedrooms, until Mme. de Rambouillet instituted her famous blue salon; hence the use of the word *ruelles*, applied to social meetings.—TR.



MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ.

to the France that preceded Louis XIV, to the old French language and spirit; more commingled in them, so to speak, by education and study; and that if they are less appreciated by foreigners than certain later writers, they owe it to what is precisely more inward, more undefinable, more charming for Frenchmen in their tone and manner. So that if to-day we attempt (and with reason) to revise or call in question many judgments delivered, twenty years ago, by scholastic professors; if we declare war pitilessly against a number of exaggerated fames, we cannot, on the other hand, venerate too much and uphold too firmly these immortal writers, who were the first to give to French literature its original character, and to secure for it to this day its unique place among the literatures of other nations. Molière drew from the spectacle of life, from the living play of human eccentricities, vices, and absurdities, all that we can conceive of strongest and highest in poesy. La Fontaine and Mme. de Sévigné, on a less wide stage, had so delicate and true a sense of the things and the life of their time,—La Fontaine nearer to nature, Mme. de Sévigné to society,—and this exquisite sense they have expressed so vividly in their writings, that they find themselves placed, without effort, beside, and very little below, their illustrious contemporary.

It is of Mme. de Sévigné only that I have now to speak. It seems as if all had been said about her; certainly the details are nearly exhausted; but I believe

that she has been until now regarded too much as isolated, which was long the case with La Fontaine, to whom she bears much resemblance. To-day, when the society of which she represents the most brilliant aspect in receding from us becomes more distinctly defined to our eyes as a whole, it is easier, and at the same time more necessary, to assign to Mme. de Sévigné her rank, her importance, and her affinities. Doubtless it is through not making these remarks, and not allowing for difference of periods, that several distinguished minds in our day seem inclined to judge with as much levity as rigour one of the most delightful geniuses that ever existed. I shall be glad if this article can help in removing some of those unjust prejudices.

The excesses of the Regency have been greatly stigmatised; but before the regency of Philippe d'Orléans there was another, not less dissolute, not less licentious, and more atrocious from the cruelty that mingled in it—a species of hideous transition between the debauchery of Henri III and that of Louis XV. The bad morals of the League, which lay low under Henri IV and Richelieu, revived, being no longer repressed. Debauchery became as monstrous as it had been in the days of the *mignons*, and as it was later in the days of the *roués*; but that which brought this period nearer to the sixteenth century and distinguished it from the eighteenth was, especially, assassinations, poisonings (Italian habits due to the Medici), and a

frenzy for duels, inherited from the civil wars. Such appears, to the impartial reader, the regency of Anne of Austria; such was the dark and bloody background upon which appeared, one fine morning, the Fronde, which people have agreed to call "a jest of mailed hands." The conduct of the women of those times, the women most distinguished for birth, beauty, and intelligence, seems fabulous; we need to believe that historians have calumniated them. But, as excess leads always to its opposite, the little band of those who escaped corruption flung themselves into sentimental metaphysics, and became *précieuses*; hence the hôtel de Rambouillet. Here was the haven, the asylum of good morals, in the midst of the highest society. As for good taste, it found its place there, in the end, inasmuch as Mme. de Sévigné was of it.

Mlle. Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, born in 1626, was the daughter of the Baron de Chantal, a frantic duellist, who, on an Easter Sunday, left the holy table to serve as second to the famous Comte de Bouteville. Brought up by her uncle, the good Abbé de Coulanges, she received early in life a solid education, and was taught, under Chapelain and Ménage, Latin, Italian, and Spanish. When eighteen years of age she married the Marquis de Sévigné, a man little worthy of her, who, after greatly neglecting her, was killed in a duel in 1651. Mme. de Sévigné, freed at that age, and left with a son and daughter, never thought of remarrying. She loved her children to excess, especially

her daughter; all other passions were unknown to her. She was, personally, a smiling blonde, not at all sensual, very gay and frolicsome; the flashes of her wit sparkled in her changeful eyes and, as she expressed it, in her "mottled eyelashes." She made herself *précieuse*; she went into society, was loved, sought, courted; sowing around her hopeless passions, to which she paid little attention, but retaining generally as friends those whom she would not take for lovers. Her cousin, Bussy, her master, Ménage, the Prince de Conti (brother of the great Condé), the Superintendent Fouquet, wasted their sighs upon her; but she remained inviolably faithful to the latter in his overthrow; when she relates his trial to M. de Pomponne it is worth while to notice with what tender feeling she speaks of "our dear unfortunate one."

Young still and beautiful, without pretension, she placed herself in society on the footing of devotion to her daughter, wishing for no other happiness than that of presenting her, and watching her shine. Mlle. de Sévigné figured, after 1663, in the brilliant ballets at Versailles, and the official poet, Benserade, who filled at Court the place that Racine and Boileau were to hold after 1672, made more than one madrigal in honour of that "shepherdess," and that "nymph," whom an idolising mother called "the prettiest girl in France." In 1669 M. de Grignan obtained her in marriage, and sixteen months later he took her to

Provence, where he commanded in the absence of M. Vendôme. Separated henceforth from her daughter, whom she never again saw except after long and unequal intervals, Mme. de Sévigné sought comfort for her loneliness in a daily correspondence, which lasted till her death in 1696, a period of twenty-five years, except for a few interregnums, when mother and daughter were briefly reunited. Before this separation, in 1671, we have only a few letters of Mme. de Sévigné, addressed either to her cousin Bussy, or to M. de Pomponne on Fouquet's trial. It is, therefore, from that date only that we know thoroughly her private life, her habits, the books she read, and even the smallest movements of the society in which she lived and of which she was the soul.

From the very first pages of this correspondence we find ourselves in a wholly different world than that of the Fronde and the Regency; we perceive that what is called French society was at last constituted. No doubt (and, in default of the numerous memoirs of that time, the anecdotes related by Mme. de Sévigné would prove it),—no doubt horrible disorders, disgraceful orgies were prevalent among that young nobility on which Louis XIV imposed, as the price of his favour, dignity, politeness, and elegance; no doubt, under that brilliant surface, that gilded glory, there were vices enough to overflow into another Regency, especially when the bigotry at the close of the reign set them all to fermenting. But at least a conventional

decorum was observed; public opinion had begun to blast whatever was ignoble and debauched. Moreover, while disorder and brutality were becoming less scandalous, decency and the employment of the intellect were gaining in simplicity. The qualification of *précieuse* had passed out of date; people remembered, with a smile, that they had once been that, but they were so no longer. No one descanted interminably, as they formerly did, on the sonnet of Job or of Uranie, on the Carte de Tendre, or the nature of the novel; but they talked, they *conversed*—on Court news, recollections of the siege of Paris, or the war in Guienne; Cardinal de Retz related his travels, M. de La Rochefoucauld moralised, Mme. de La Fayette made heartfelt reflections, and Mme. de Sévigné interrupted them to quote a clever saying of her daughter, a prank of her son, an aberration of the worthy d'Hacqueville or of M. de Brancas.

We find it difficult in these days, with our habits of practical occupation, to represent to ourselves faithfully this life of leisure and of talk. The world now moves so fast, so many things are brought upon the stage, that we find we have not the time to examine and grasp them. Our present days are spent in studies, our evenings in serious discussions; of agreeable conversations, interesting talks, we have few or none. The noble society of our day, which has preserved to some extent the leisure habits of the two preceding centuries, seems to have done so on condi-

tion of keeping aloof from the ideas and the manners and morals of the present.

At the period of which I speak, conversation had not yet become, as it did in the eighteenth century in the salons under the rule of Fontenelle, an occupation, a business, an exaction; wit was not made necessarily an aim; display, geometrical, philosophical, and sentimental, was not demanded: but they talked, they conversed, of themselves and others, of little or of nothing. It was conversation, as Mme. de Sévigné herself says, *ad infinitum*: "After dinner," she writes somewhere to her daughter, "we went to talk in the most agreeable woods in the world; we were there till six o'clock, engaged in various sorts of conversation so kind, so tender, so amiable, so obliging, both for you and for me, that I am touched to the heart by it." Amid a course of society so easy, so simple, so desultory, and so gracefully animated, a visit, a letter received, insignificant in itself, was an event in which all took pleasure and related eagerly. The least things became of value from the manner and form of telling; it was art which, without perceiving it, and very negligently, they put into life.

It is often said that Mme. de Sévigné gave minute care to her letters, and that in writing them she thought, if not of posterity, at least of the social world of her day, whose suffrages she sought. That is false: the days of Voiture and Balzac were past. She wrote usually offhand, as the pen ran, and of all the things

she could; if time pressed, she scarcely read over her letters. "In truth," she says, "between friends one ought to let the pens trot as they like; mine always has the rein on its neck." But there are days when she has more time, or else she feels in better humour for writing; then, very naturally, she takes pains, she arranges, she composes very much as La Fontaine composed a fable: such, for instance, as her letter to M. de Coulanges on the marriage of Mademoiselle; or the one about poor Picard, dismissed because he would not spread the hay. Letters of this sort, brilliant in form and in art, in which there were not too many little secrets or slanders, made talk in society and every one desired to read them. "I must not forget to tell you what happened this morning," writes Mme. de Coulanges to her friend; "I was told: 'Madame, a lacquey from Mme. de Thianges is here'; I ordered them to bring him in. This is what he had to say to me: 'Madame, I am sent by Mme. de Thianges, who begs you to send her the *horse* letter of Mme. de Sévigné, and also that of the *meadow*.' I told the lacquey that I would take them to his mistress, and I have done so. Your letters make all the noise they deserve; it is certain that they are delightful; and you are as much so as your letters."

Correspondence at that time had, like conversation, great importance; but neither was composed; people simply put all their minds and all their souls into them. Mme. de Sévigné praises her daughter con-

tinually in the matter of letters: "You write incomparable thoughts and effusions," and she adds that she reads "here and there" certain choice passages to persons who are worthy of them: "sometimes I give a little bit to Mme. de Villars, but she wants the tender parts, and tears fill her eyes."

If some deny to Mme. de Sévigné the spontaneousness of her letters, no one has ever questioned the sincerity of her love for her daughter; and there again they forget the period in which she lived, and how in that life of luxurious idleness persons may resemble fancies, just as manias may often become passions. She idolised her daughter, and had early established herself on that footing in society. Arnauld d'Andilly called her, in that respect, "a pretty pagan." Separation had only increased her tenderness; she had scarcely any other thing to speak of; the questions and compliments of those she met always brought her back to it; that dear and almost single affection of her heart ended, in the long run, by becoming her status, her posture, her demeanour, which she used as she did her fan. Mme. de Sévigné was perfectly sincere, frank, and an enemy to all pretence; to her, among the first, do we owe the saying that a person is *true*; she might have invented that expression for her daughter if M. de La Rochefoucauld had not already found it for Mme. de La Fayette; she takes pleasure in applying it to those she loves. When we have analysed, and twisted, and turned in all ways that inexhaustible

mother-love, we come back to the opinion and explanation of M. de Pomponne: "It seems, you say, that Mme. de Sévigné loves Mme. de Grignan passionately; and you want to know what is at the bottom of it. Shall I tell you? It is that *she loves her passionately.*" It would, indeed, be very ungrateful to cavil at Mme. de Sévigné for this innocent and legitimate passion, to which we owe the opportunity to follow the wittiest and most intellectual of women through twenty-five years of the most charming period of the most delightful French society.

La Fontaine, painter of fields and animals, did not ignore society, and has often pictured it with dainty and malicious touches. Mme. de Sévigné, on her side, loved the fields; she made long stays at Livry with the Abbé de Coulanges, or on her own estate of *Les Rochers* in Bretagne; it is piquant to learn under what aspects she saw and has pictured Nature. We at once perceive that, like our good fabulist, she had early read *Astrée*, and had dreamed in her youth beneath the mythological shades of Vaux and Saint-Mandé. She loves to walk "by the rays of the beautiful mistress of Endymion"; to pass two hours "alone with the Hamadryads"; her trees are decorated with inscriptions and ingenious devices, such as passages from the *Pastor fido* and the *Aminta*: "*Bella cosa far niente*, says one of my trees; another answers: *Amor odil inertes.*" And elsewhere she says: "As for our sentences, they are not defaced; I go

often to look at them; they are even increased, and two trees side by side sometimes contradict each other: *La lontananza ogni gran piaga salda*; and then: *Piaga d'amor non si sana moi.*'

These rather insipid reminiscences of pastorals and romances come naturally from her pen, and bring out very agreeably many fresh and novel descriptions that are wholly her own:

"I came here (Livry) to end the summer and say farewell to the leaves; they are still on the trees, they have only changed colour; instead of being green they are now aurora colour, and so many sorts of aurora that they compose a brocade of gold, very rich and magnificent, which we try to think lovelier than green—if only by way of change."

And when she is at *Les Rochers* she cries out: "I should be very happy in these woods if I only had a leaf that sings: ah! the pretty thing a singing leaf would be!" How she pictures for us "the triumph of the month of May"! when the "nightingale, the cuckoo, the white-throated warblers in the forest herald the spring." How she makes us feel and almost live in "those beautiful crystal days of autumn, which are no longer hot and yet not cold"! When her son, to pay for some foolish extravagance, cuts down the ancient woods of Buron, she is roused to emotion, she weeps with all those fugitive dryads, those evicted wood-nymphs.

Because we often find her in a gay and frolicsome humour, we should do wrong to consider Mme. de Sévigné either frivolous or shallow. She was serious,

even sad, especially during the sojourns she made in the country; revery held a great place in her life. But here it is necessary to come to an understanding: she did not dream in her long and sombre avenues like Delphine, or the mistress of Oswald; that style of revery was not invented in her day; it needed, as a preliminary, that Mme. de Staël should write her admirable book on the *Influence des Passions sur le Bonheur*. Until then, dreaming was a much easier, much simpler, much more personal thing; yet it was one of which the dreamer rendered little account to herself: it was thinking of her daughter in Provence, of her son with the armies of the king, of her friends far away or dead; it was saying: "As for my life, you know it; it is passed with five or six friends whose society pleases me, and in duties to which I am compelled and which are no small matter. But what vexes me is, that in doing nothing the days go by, and our poor life is made up of such days, and we grow old and die. I think that hard."

Formal and precise religion, which governed life in those days, contributed much to temper the licence of sensibility and imagination, which, since then, has felt no curb. Mme. de Sévigné guarded herself carefully from those thoughts over which she believed it "best to glide." She expressly desires that morals be Christian, and more than once she jokes her daughter on being tainted with Descartism. As for her, amid the chances and changes of this world, she bows

her head, and takes refuge in a sort of providential fatalism, which her relations with Port-Royal and her readings of Nicole and Saint Augustine had inspired in her. This religious and resigned tendency in her increased with age, without altering in any way the serenity of her temper; but it often communicated to her language something more strongly wise and a greater tenderness. In a letter to M. de Coulanges, on the death of the minister Louvois, she rises almost to the sublimity of Bossuet, just as at other times and in other places she attains to the comedy of Molière.

M. de Saint-Surin, in his excellent work on Mme. de Sévigné, has lost no occasion to contrast her with Mme. de Staël, and to place her above that famous woman. I believe there is interest and profit in thus comparing them; but it ought not to be done to the detriment of either. Mme. de Staël represents a completely new society; Mme. de Sévigné a vanished society; hence vast differences, which one might be tempted at first sight to explain solely by the different turn of their minds and natures. Without pretending to deny the profound divergence of their two souls—one of which knew only maternal love, the other knowing every passion, the most generous and even the most virile—I find in both, looking closely at them, many weaknesses, many ordinary qualities, the divers developments of which were solely the result of the diversity of periods. What natural ease full of gracious light-heartedness, what dazzling pages

of pure intellect in Mme. de Staël when sentiment does not interfere and she allows her philosophy and her politics to slumber! And Mme. de Sévigné, does she never descant and philosophise? Why else should she make her daily reading in Saint Augustine? — for this woman, called frivolous, read all and read well: “It gives,” she said, “such pale colours to the mind not to enjoy solid reading.” She read Rabelais, Montaigne, and Pascal, the “Cleopatra” of Quintilian, Saint John Chrysostom and Tacitus, and Virgil, “not travestied, but in the grandeur of Latin and Italian.” When it rained, she read folios in twelve days. During Lent she made it a joy to give herself up to Bourdaloue. Her conduct toward Fouquet in his overthrow lets us imagine what devotion she would have been capable of in times of revolution. If she shows herself a little vainglorious when the king, one evening, dances with her, or when, at Saint-Cyr, he pays her a compliment after the acting of *Esther*, who else of her sex would have been more philosophical? Did not Mme. de Staël put herself to great cost and trouble to obtain a word or a glance from the conqueror of Egypt and Italy? Certainly a woman who, mingling from youth with Ménage, Godeau, Benserade, and their like, preserved herself by the sole force of her good sense from their insipidities and punctilios; who evaded, as if playfully, the more refined and seductive pretensions of Saint-Évremond and her cousin Bussy; a woman, friend and admirer of Mlle. de

Scudéry and of Mme. de Maintenon, who kept herself equally distant from the romantic sentiments of the one and the strait-laced reserve of the other; who, allied with Port-Royal, and feeding on the works of *ces Messieurs*, valued none the less Montaigne, and quoted none the less Rabelais, and who wished no other inscription on what she called her convent than the words: "Sacred Liberty," or "Do what you like," as at the Abbey of Thélème—such a woman may frolic and sport and "glide over thoughts," and choose to take things by their familiar and diverting side, but, all the same, she gives proof of an inward energy, an originality, that was rare indeed.

There is one single instance in which we cannot help regretting that Mme. de Sévigné gave way to her light-hearted, bantering habit; an instance in which we absolutely refuse to share her jest, and for which, after seeking all its extenuating reasons, we find it hard to forgive her: it is when she relates so gaily to her daughter the revolt of the Bas-Breton peasantry, and the horrible severities that repressed it. So long as she confined herself to laughing at the Assemblies, at the country-gentlemen and their giddy galas, at their enthusiasm for voting everything "'twixt midnight and one o'clock," and the other after-dinner follies of her Breton neighbours, it is all very well; it is, in fact, a merry and legitimate pleasantry, recalling in places the touch of Molière; but from the moment that M. de Forbin arrives with six thousand troops against the

malcontents, and those poor devils, perceiving from afar the soldiers, disperse among the fields or fall upon their knees, crying out, *Mea culpa* (the only French words they know); when, to punish Rennes, its parliament is transferred to Vannes; when they take, haphazard, twenty-five men and hang them; when they drive out and evict a whole street-full of people, women in childbed, old men and children, and forbid that any succour be given them on pain of death; when they torture on the wheel; when they quarter; and when, weary themselves of torturing and quartering, they hang—in the midst of such horrors perpetrated upon innocent persons or poor, misguided creatures, we suffer in seeing Mme. de Sévigné jesting almost as usual; we wish she had shown indignation, a burning, bitter, heartfelt indignation; above all, we would like to erase from her letters such lines as these:

“The real rioters at Rennes ran away long ago, so the good have to suffer in place of the wicked; but I think it all very right, provided the four thousand soldiers who are at Rennes under MM. de Forbin and de Vins do not prevent me from walking in my woods, which are of a height and beauty that is marvellous. . . . They have captured sixty of the burghers, and begin to hang them to-morrow. This province will be a fine example to all the others; it will teach them to respect their governors and not to insult them and fling stones into their gardens. . . . You speak very humorously of our troubles; but we have no longer so many broken on the wheel; only one a week to keep justice going; the *hangings* seem to me now a refreshment.”

The Duc de Chaulnes, who instigated all these cruelties because stones were thrown into his garden



COMTESSE DE GRIGNAN.

and insults were shouted to him (the most personal of them being "fat pig"), was not lowered one iota thereby in Mme. de Sévigné's estimation; he remained for her and for Mme. de Grignan "our dear duke," and later, when he is appointed ambassador to Rome and leaves Bretagne, she says the whole region is "left to sadness." Certainly there is matter here for reflection on the morals and the civilisation of the great century. We regret that on this occasion Mme. de Sévigné's heart did not rise above the prejudices of her time; it was fitted to do so, for her kindness and goodness equalled her beauty and her grace. There were times when she recommended galley-slaves to the mercy of M. de Vivonne or to M. de Grignan. The most interesting of her *protégés* was a gentleman of Provence, whose name has not been preserved. "The poor young fellow," she says, "was attached to M. Fouquet; he has been convicted of having been the means of conveying a letter to Mme. Fouquet from her husband, for which he is condemned to the galleys for five years; it is a rather extraordinary case. You know that he is one of the most honourable young men you could find, and as fit for the galleys as to catch the moon by his teeth."

The style of Mme. de Sévigné has been so often and so intelligently judged, analysed, admired, that it would be difficult to-day to find eulogy both novel and suitable to apply to it; on the other hand, I do not find myself disposed to revive a worn-out topic by

cavilling criticism. A single general observation will suffice: it is that we may connect the grand and beautiful styles of the Louis XIV period with two different systems, two opposite manners. Malherbe and Balzac founded in our literature the learned, polished, chastened, cultivated style; in the composition of which they came from thought to expression, slowly, by degrees, and by dint of tentatives and erasures. This is the style that Boileau advised for all purposes; he would fain have a work returned twenty times to the stocks to be polished and re-polished constantly; he boasts of having taught Racine to write easy verses in a difficult manner. Racine is, in fact, the most perfect specimen of this style in poesy; Fléchier was less successful in his prose. But, by the side of this style of writing, always somewhat uniform and academic, there is another, widely different, free, capricious, variable, without traditional method, and wholly conformed to diversities of talent and genius. Montaigne and Regnier gave admirable samples of it, and Queen Marguerite a most charming one in her familiar memoirs, the work of her *après-dînnées*: this is the broad, untrammelled, abundant style that follows the current of ideas; the style of the first thought, the *prime-sautier*, as Montaigne himself would say; it is that of La Fontaine and Molière, that of Fénelon, of Bossuet, of the Duc de Saint-Simon, and of Mme. de Sévigné. The latter excels in it; she lets her pen "trot with the reins on its neck," and, as it

goes along, she scatters in profusion colours, comparisons, images, while wit and sentiment escape her on all sides. She is thus placed, without intending or suspecting it, in the front rank of the writers of our language.

I ask myself how Mme. de Sévigné issues from a fresh study of her: She issues such as a first sight of her suggested, and more than ever like unto herself. I am confirmed, after study and reflection, in the idea that a first frank impression had given me of her. In the first place, the more we think of it the better we explain to ourselves her mother-love; that love which, for her, represented all the others. Her rich, strong nature, a nature sound and blooming, in which gaiety was chiefly the temperament with serious thought beneath it, never had a passion properly so-called. Left an orphan early, she never felt filial tenderness; she never spoke of her mother; once or twice she even jested about the memory of her father, whom she never knew. As for conjugal love, she tried it loyally; it soon became bitter to her, and she had no chance to give herself up to it. Left a young and beautiful widow, with a free, intrepid spirit, had she, in that dazzling rôle of Célimène, some hidden weakness that lay concealed? Did a spark ever fall upon her heart? Was she ever in danger of an instant's forgetfulness with her cousin Bussy? We never know what to expect of these smiling, brilliant creatures, and we should often be finely duped if we

fastened upon words which, said by others, would mean a great deal. The fact is that she resisted Bussy, her greatest peril, and though she may have liked him a little, she never loved him with passion. Passion she never felt for any one until the day when the accumulation of her treasures of tenderness fell upon the head of her daughter to be nevermore displaced. An elegiac poet has remarked that a love which comes late is often the most violent; all the arrears of feelings and emotions are paid at once:

" Sæpe venit magno fœnore tardus amor. "

So of Mme. de Sévigné. Her daughter inherited all the savings of that rich and feeling heart, which had said to itself until that day, "I wait." There is the true answer to those hypercritical minds who have chosen to see in Mme. de Sévigné's love for her daughter an affectation and form of posing. Mme. de Grignan was the great, the one only passion of her mother; and this maternal tenderness had all the characteristics of passion, enthusiasm, prejudice, and slight absurdity (if I may apply that word to such persons), with a *naïveté* of indiscretion that makes us smile. Let us not complain of it. Mme. de Sévigné's whole correspondence is illumined by this passion which came, at last, to add itself to the brilliancy, already so varied, of her imagination and her delightful humour.¹

¹ Mme. de Grignan's merits have been much discussed; her mother has done her some wrong in our eyes by praising her too much. The

On this latter point, I mean temperament and humour, let us try to understand Mme. de Sévigné thoroughly. In speaking of her, we are speaking of grace itself, not a soft and languid grace, but a lively, overflowing grace, full of wit and intellect, and without the least touch of pale colour. She has a vein of Molière in her. There's a Dorine in Mme. de Sévigné, a Dorine of the great world and the best company, with very nearly the same vigour and raciness. A few words of Tallemant have very well characterised that charming and powerful feminine nature, such as it showed itself, quite young, in its abounding life. After saying that he thinks her one of the most amiable and most honourable women in Paris, he adds: "She sings, she dances, she has a very lively and agreeable wit; she is *brusque* and cannot keep herself from saying what she thinks pretty, although quite often they are things rather free." That is a saying we should not lose sight of in thinking of her, covering it, however, with all the delicacy and courtesy that we like. There was joy in her. She verified in her person Ninon's saying: "The joy of the spirit shows its strength." She was of the race

son, who was somewhat of a libertine, appears to us more agreeable. It would seem as if Mme. de Sévigné's reason and gaiety, so charmingly mingled in her, were divided between her children; the son having all his mother's grace but not her reason; the daughter having the reason only, and with it a certain crabbedness, not tempered, and without either piquancy or charm. Certain tales of her insolence and ill-temper have come down to us.

of minds to which belonged Molière, Ninon herself, Mme. Cornuel somewhat, and La Fontaine; a generation slightly anterior to Racine and Boileau, and more full-blooded, more vigorously nourished. "You seem born for pleasures," Mme. de La Fayette said to her, "and pleasures seem made for you. Your presence increases all amusements, and amusements increase your beauty when they surround you. In short, joy is the true state of your soul, and grief is more contrary to you than to any one else in the world." She said herself, recollecting an old friend: "I have just seen M. de Larrei, son of our poor friend Lenet with whom we laughed so much; for never was any youth so full of laughter as ours, and of all kinds."

Her rather irregular but real beauty became radiant at moments when she grew animated; her countenance was lighted by her mind, or, to quote a saying literally, "her mind even dazzled our eyes." One of her friends (the Abbé Arnauld), who had as little imagination as it was possible to have, must have found some in order to describe her when he tells us: "I seem to see her still as she appeared to me the first time I had the honour of seeing her, seated in her carriage all open, between monsieur her son and mademoiselle her daughter: all three such as the poets represent Latona with the young Apollo and the young Diana, such charm shone forth from the mother and children." We see her there, in her natural frame and

full expansion: beauty, mind, and grace unveiled and glowing in the sunshine.

I must note, however, one shadow. Her joyousness, real as it was, was not for all seasons, nor out of season, and as the years went on it lessened, though it was never extinguished. Speaking of a journey she made in 1672, during which she regretted not having the company of her amiable cousin de Coulanges, she writes: "To feel joy we must be with joyous people. You know I am what people want me to be; I originate nothing." Which merely means that this charming spirit possesses all tones and could adjust itself to the notes of others. Certain it is that even amid sadness and vexations she continued the finest-tempered woman, with the most playful imagination ever seen. She had a way of her own, a gift of sudden and familiar imagery with which she could clothe her thought unexpectedly, as, indeed, none but she could do. Even when that thought was serious, even when sensibility was at the bottom of it, she used words that play upon it and give the effect of gaiety. Her spirit could never divest itself of that vivacious sparkle, that gaiety of colour. She was just the contrary of her good friends the Jansenists; theirs was the *sad* style.

And, now, if what I have here said should seem to some critical minds to have pushed admiration for Mme. de Sévigné too far, will they permit me to ask them a question? Have you read her? By reading,

I do not mean running hastily over her letters, nor singling out two or three which enjoy an almost classic reputation—such as those on the marriage of Mademoiselle, on the death of Vatel, on those of M. de Turenne and the young Duc de Longueville—but entering in and going with her, step by step, through the ten volumes of her letters, following all, *winding through all* (as she herself would say), doing for her as we do for “Clarissa Harlowe” when we have a fortnight’s rain and leisure in the country. After that not very terrible trial let any one find fault with my admiration if he has the courage, and if, indeed, he remembers it.

VIII.

Bossuet.

VIII.

Bossuet.

THE fame of Bossuet has become one of the religions of France, it is recognised, it is proclaimed, and men honour themselves in bringing to it daily fresh tribute, in finding new reasons for its existence and its growth; they discuss it no longer. It is the privilege of true greatness to define itself more and more clearly as it recedes, and to command from a distance. What is singular, nevertheless, in this fate, this sort of apotheosis of Bossuet, is that he thus becomes greater and greater for us without, for all that, inducing us to think him necessarily right in certain of the most important controversies in which he was engaged. We love Fénelon, we cherish his graces, his noble and refined ingratiations, his chaste elegances; we forgive him readily for what are called his errors; but Bossuet combats them, not only forcibly, but to excess, with a species of hardness. No matter! the great voice of the contradictor carries you away in spite of yourself, and forces you to bow your head regardless of your inward attachment to him he

is striking down. So with the long and obstinate pitched battles waged on the Gallican question. Whether you are Gallican or whether you are not, you applaud or you breathe a sigh over that spot of the career, but the illustrious course as a whole loses nothing of its grandeur and its majesty in your eyes.

I shall venture to say the same thing of the relentless war that Bossuet waged against Protestantism under all its forms. Every enlightened Protestant, making his reserves on points of history, will own, with respect, that he never encountered another such adversary. In politics also, however little of a partisan one may be of the consecration theory and the right divine such as Bossuet institutes and proclaims it, we should be almost sorry if that doctrine had not found so simple, so manly, so sincere an organ, and one so innately convinced. A God, a Christ, a bishop, a king—there, taken as a whole, is the luminous sphere in which Bossuet's thought evolves itself and reigns; there is his ideal for the world.

Just as in ancient times there was a people apart, who, under the inspiration and guidance of Moses, kept clear and distinct the idea of a God, an ever-present Creator, governing the world directly, while all the neighbouring peoples wandered from that idea, confused to them in clouds of fancy, or smothered under phantoms of the imagination, or submerged in the exuberant luxury of nature, so Bossuet among



JACQUES BÉNIGNE BOSSUET.

From a steel engraving.

moderns has grasped, more than any other, that simple idea of order, authority, unity, of continual government by Providence, and he applies it to all things without effort, and as if by undeniable deduction. Bossuet is the Hebrew genius extended and fertilised by Christianity, open to all the acquisitions of the intellect, but retaining something of sovereign prohibition and closing his vast horizon precisely where, for him, light ends. In tone and gesture he belongs to the race of Moses. He mingles the bearing of the Prophet-King with the emotions of an ardent and sublime pathos; he is the eloquent voice *par excellence*, the simplest, the strongest, the most abrupt, the most familiar, yet resounding with sudden thunder. Within the bounds of his rigid and imperious current flow treasures of eternal human ethics. It is through all these characteristics that he is still unique for us, and that, whatever use may be made of his words, he remains our model of the highest eloquence and the noblest language.

Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, born at Dijon, September 27, 1627, of a good and ancient *bourgeois* family of magistrates and members of parliaments, was brought up among books in the family library. His father, having entered, as dean of counsellors (a newly created office), the Parliament of Metz, left his children in care of his brother, who was counsellor to the Parliament of Dijon. Young Bossuet, who lived in his uncle's house, attended classes at the Jesuit college

of the town. He distinguished himself early by a surprising capacity of memory and comprehension; he knew Virgil by heart, and a little later he knew Homer. His great pagan preference, if I may so express it, was instinctively first for Homer, then for Virgil; Horace, to his taste and his judgment, came later. But the book which, above all, determined the genius and the vocation of Bossuet, and which became the regulator of all within him, was the Bible. It is related that the first time he read it he was, as it were, illumined and transported. He had found the source whence his own genius was to flow, like one of the four great rivers in Genesis.

Bossuet was destined in childhood for the Church: tonsured when eight years of age, he was barely thirteen when he was appointed to a canonry of the cathedral at Metz. His boyhood and his adolescence were therefore regular, pure, and wholly directed toward the Temple. He went to Paris for the first time in September, 1642. It is said that on the very day of his arrival he saw the entrance of Cardinal de Richelieu, in a dying condition, on his return from his vengeance on the south of France; the minister was borne in a movable chamber covered with scarlet cloth. To have seen, were it only once, Richelieu, all powerful in the purple, and soon after to see the Fronde, civil war unchained, and anarchy, was for Bossuet a compendious course in politics, from which he drew the sound lesson: better one master than a thousand masters, and,

better still, that the master be the king himself and not the minister.

Entering, for his course in philosophy, the college of Navarre, he distinguished himself in themes and addresses in public; he was a prodigy and a school angel before he became the eagle we admire. We all know that, being extolled at the hôtel de Rambouillet by the Marquis de Feuquières, who had known his father at Metz and extended his goodwill to the son, young Bossuet was taken there one evening to preach an impromptu sermon. In lending himself to such singular exercises, exhibitions at which his person and his talent were challenged, treated like a virtuoso of intellect in the salons of the hôtel de Rambouillet and that of de Nevers, it does not appear that Bossuet's vanity was touched in the slightest degree; there is no other example of a precocious genius thus lauded and caressed by society and remaining as truly exempt from all self-love and coquetry.

He often went to Metz to repose himself in study and a sterner life after his successes and triumphs in Paris. He was there ordained, successively, subdeacon, deacon, archdeacon, and priest (1652). He even settled himself in Metz for six years to fulfil assiduously his functions as archdeacon and canon. It was then that he preached the first sermons that we have of his, and his first panegyrics; also he took up arms for the first time as a controversialist against the Protestants, who abounded in that province. In a

word, Bossuet conducted himself like a militant young Levite, who, instead of accepting at once an agreeable post at the centre of all things in the capital, preferred to inure himself and temper himself by bearing the arms of the Word where duty and danger called him, on the frontier.

Of Bossuet's earliest sermons, among those he preached at Metz in his youth, one has been specially pointed out by the Abbé Vaillant; it is that for the ninth Sunday after Whitsunday. Bossuet seeks to show at one and the same time the kindness and the rigour of God, the tenderness and severity of Jesus. He begins by showing Jesus moved to pity when he enters the city that is about to betray him, and weeping over it; then he shows him irritated and implacable, avenging himself, or letting his Father avenge him on the walls and on the children of that same Jerusalem. This sermon preached, as Bossuet said in closing it, "as God has inspired it in me," has something youthful, eager, bold in places, rash, and even strange. He tries to represent in the same discourse the merciful Saviour and the inexorable Saviour, the tender heart and the angry heart of Jesus: "Listen first," he says, "to the sweet, benign voice of this Lamb without spot, and then you shall hear the roarings of the victorious Lion born of the tribe of Judah: that is the subject of this discourse. . . ."

More might be said on this first period of Bossuet's life, both at Metz and in Paris. We might inquire,

for instance, what his personal appearance was in his youth, at the age when he delivered these sermons, already so powerful, with a precocious authority through which shone a visible inspiration, embellished, so to speak, with a lingering *naïveté*. We are told that Nature had endowed him with a noble face; the fire of his mind shone in his glance; the characteristics of his genius permeated his speech. It is sufficient to consult his portrait in the Louvre, painted in old age by Rigaud, from which to form a true idea of what he must have been in his youth. The Abbé Le Dieu, in his "Memoirs, etc., on the Life and Work of Bossuet," says that "his eyes were gentle, yet piercing; his voice seemed always to come from a passionate soul; his gestures in oration were modest, tranquil, natural." But, better still, see his bust in the Louvre by Coysevox: noble head, splendid carriage, pride without assumption; forehead lofty and full, the seat of thought and majesty; the mouth singularly agreeable, sensitive, speaking even in repose; a straight and most distinguished profile: the whole with an expression of fire, intelligence, and kindness—a countenance most worthy of manhood, whether he is made to speak to his fellows or to gaze into heaven. Take from that face its wrinkles, shed over it the bloom of life and youth, dream of a young and adolescent Bossuet; but do not describe him too minutely to yourself, lest you miss the severity of the subject and the respect that is due to him.

When Bossuet quitted Metz to settle in Paris the effect was shown instantly in his eloquence; and to read his productions of that period is like passing from one climate to another. "In following Bossuet's discourses in their chronological order," says the Abbé Vaillant, "we see the old words fall successively like the leaves in autumn." Antiquated or trivial expressions, repulsive images, lapses of good taste, which were less the fault of Bossuet's youth than of that whole epoch of transition which preceded the great reign, disappeared, leaving the new language free, unconstrained, sudden, unexpected, never to recoil, as he said of Saint Paul, "before the glorious degradations of Christianity," but ready to glorify magnificently its combats, its spiritual government, and its triumphs. Frequently called upon, after the year 1662, to preach before the Court, having also to speak in churches or before the great communities of Paris, Bossuet acquired immediately the language in use, all the while keeping and developing his own and stripping himself of that of the provinces. The provinces, however, through a discipline and practice of six years, had trained and inured him; the Court merely polished him as much and no more than he needed. He was a finished orator at thirty-four years of age. During eight or nine years, from 1660 to 1669, he was the great preacher in vogue, and in renown.

Bossuet's talent was anterior in origin and formation

to the period of Louis XIV, but he owed much of its completion and perfection to the young king. More than once attempts have been made to deprive Louis XIV of his species of useful influence and propitious ascendancy over what is called his epoch; such attempts are unjust and exclusive. Bossuet in particular, as I think, shows us a great and striking example of the sort of benefits that the epoch of Louis XIV owed to the young star of the king from the day of its rising. Treated with distinction by Anne of Austria, and becoming, towards the end, her chosen preacher, Bossuet at first indulged in certain luxuries of intellect, certain diffuse and subtle discriminations that belonged to the taste of the day. Delivering before the queen-mother in 1658 (or 59) his "Panegyric of Saint Teresa," Bossuet, excited perhaps by the choice style of the Spanish saint, and carefully developing a passage in Tertullian which says that Jesus, before dying, desired to "sate himself with the delights of patience," does not shrink from adding: "Would you not say, Christians, according to the words of that father, the whole life of the Saviour was a *feast* at which the *meats were tortures*? strange feast! but one which Jesus deemed worthy of his taste. His death sufficed for our salvation, but his death did not suffice to quench that *marvellous appetite* that he had to suffer for us." There, assuredly, is the *bel esprit* in vogue during the Regency. But after he was summoned to preach before the young

king he quickly learned to correct such sayings and repress them.

When Louis XIV heard Bossuet for the first time he liked him much and did a charming thing for him, very worthy of a youthful monarch who still had his mother: he sent a letter to Bossuet's father at Metz, "to congratulate him on having such a son." Whoso does not feel that delicacy is not fitted to feel the sort of influence that the young king had over the vast imagination and sound mind of Bossuet. Louis XIV had, at all times, the fit and proper word, just as he had, they say, correctness and a sense of symmetry in the glance of his eye. He had in him, and he had about him, something that warned others not to be excessive, and to force nothing. Bossuet, speaking in his presence, felt that in the matter of elevated taste he had before him a regulator. I wish to say nothing but what is incontestable: Louis XIV, very young, was useful to Bossuet in giving him proportion and all its *justesse*, accuracy. The great and consecrated orator continued to owe to himself alone and to the spirit that filled him his inspirations and his originality.

Here is a fact that can be verified: in the series of Bossuet's Sermons that have been classified, not in the chronological order in which he composed them, but according to the order of the Christian year, beginning with All Saint's day and the Advent and ending with Whitsunday, if you desire to put your hand

with certainty on one of the finest and most irreproachable, take any one of those that are labelled : "Preached before the King."

It is true to say that in all the sermons or discourses delivered by Bossuet from 1661 to 1669 and later, there are wonderful passages, far more moving to readers of any class than the sermons of Bourdaloue so much read in these days. In the "Panegyric of Saint Paul," how he takes possession of the subject in its depths, by its most secret and supernatural side! Paul is "the more powerful because he feels himself weak"; it is his weakness that makes his strength. He is the Apostle, without art, of a hidden wisdom, an incomprehensible wisdom, that shocks and scandalises, but into which he will put no deceit or artifice:

"He goes into that polished Greece, mother of philosophers and orators; and, in spite of the resistance of that world, he there establishes more churches than Plato gained disciples by an eloquence that was called divine. He pushes still farther his conquests; he casts down at the feet of the Saviour the majesty of the Roman fasces in the person of a pro-consul; he forces Rome herself to hear his voice, and the day is coming when that mistress-city will feel herself more honoured by an epistle from Paul's hand addressed to her citizens, than by all the famous harangues she has heard from her Cicero.

"Whence comes it, Christian? It is because Paul has means for persuasion that Greece could never teach and Rome has never learned. A supernatural power, taking pleasure in lifting up that which the proud despise, instils itself and mingles in the majestic simplicity of his words. Hence it is that we admire in his wonderful Epistles a certain virtue, more than human, which persuades against all rules—or rather which does not persuade so much as it takes captive the understanding: which flatters not the ear, but sends its blows straight to the

heart. Just as we see a great river restraining, as it flows across a plain, the violent and impetuous force it has acquired in the mountains whence it draws its origin, so this celestial power, contained in the writings of Saint Paul, preserves, even in the simplicity of that style, all the vigour it brought with it from the Heaven whence it came."

Let us now take other sermons preached before the Court: that on Ambition (1666), on Honour (1666), on the Love of Pleasures (1662); beauties of the same order shine throughout them. On ambition and on honour, he says, facing Louis XIV, all that could warn him of the present and future idolatry of which he was the object, if any warning could avail. He seeks to show by the examples of Nero and Nebuchadnezzar, "what can be done in the human soul by the terrible thought of nothing being above his head. It is then," he says, "that immoderate desires grow daily more and more subtle, and double, if I may say so, their stake. Thence come unknown vices . . . " And on the man, small in himself and ashamed of his smallness, struggling to increase himself, to magnify himself, who imagines that he can incorporate within him all that he amasses and acquires: "Be he count, be he seigneur," he says, "possessor of great wealth, master of many persons, minister of all the councils, and so on; let him magnify himself as much as he pleases, and yet it takes but one death to cast him down. . . . " The characteristic of Bossuet is to seize at a first glance the great ideas that are fixed bounds and necessary

limits of things, suppressing the intervening spaces where the external childhood of man forgets and deludes itself.

Lest it be said that I seek in him only his lessons to the great and powerful, let me say that in that same sermon on Honour, where he enumerates and denounces the different sorts of worldly vanity, he does not forget the men of letters, the poets, those who, after their fashion, grasp at renown and empire:

“They think themselves the wisest who are vain in their gifts of intellect—learned men, men of literature, the wits of the day. In truth, Christians, they are worthy to be distinguished from others, for they are the finest ornaments of the world. But who can endure them when, as soon as they are conscious of a little talent, they weary all ears with their deeds and their sayings, and because they know how to put words together, measure a verse, or round a period, think they have the right to make themselves listened to forever and sovereignly to decide all matters? O justness in life! O equality in manners and morals! O moderation in the passions! rich and true adornments of reasonable nature, when shall we learn to esteem you rightly?”

Eternal art of Poesy, principle, maintainer, and higher law of true talents, here we behold you, established, as it were by the way, in Bossuet's sermon at the very moment when Boileau in his “Satires” is striving to find you. But how much higher up springs the source, and from what surer regions in Bossuet than in the Horaces and Boileaus!

During the first years of his life in Paris he began his subsequently famous series of Funeral Orations. We have the one he pronounced over Père Bourgoing,

the general of the Oratoire, and over Nicolas Cornet, grandmaster of Navarre, and the cherished master of Bossuet in particular. There are beauties in both these discourses; in that over Nicolas Cornet the question of Grace and Free Will, which were then agitating the Church under the names of Jansenist and Molinist, are admirably defined; and Bossuet, by the liberal manner in which he states them, shows to what point he is aloof from parties and soars above them. Bossuet needed ampler and loftier subjects; while awaiting them he magnifies and exalts those he treats, but we feel the disproportion. He thundered a little in the void on such occasions, or, rather, in two narrow a space: his voice was too strong for the building.

He must have been more at his ease and felt himself more at large in speaking of Anne of Austria, whose Funeral Oration he pronounced in 1667; and here is a singular thing: that discourse in which Bossuet must have given free course to the gratitude of his heart and to a display of historical magnificence, was never printed!

The death, in 1669, of the Queen of England [Henrietta Maria, daughter of Henri IV and wife of Charles I] gave him the most majestic and grandiose of subjects. He needed the fall and restoration of thrones, the revolutions of empires, all fates collected in a single life and weighing down a single head, as the eagle needs the vast profundity of the skies and

beneath him the abysses and the storms of ocean. But let us here note another service done by Louis XIV and his reign to Bossuet. He might have found such great subjects during the disastrous epochs of the Fronde and the civil wars, but they would have come to him scattered and, in some sort, without limits. Louis XIV and his reign gave him the frame in which these great subjects were limited and fixed, but not dwarfed. In the august, well-defined epoch in the bosom of which he spoke, Bossuet, without losing aught of his own expanse, or of the freedom and boldness of his glance into the distance, found around him on all sides this point of support, this security, this encouragement, and also a subtle warning of which talent and genius itself have need. No doubt Bossuet put his trust, first of all, in Heaven, but as an orator his authority and calm force were doubled by the sense that beneath him, and at the moment that he pressed it with his foot, the soil of France no longer trembled.

All those who have written on Bossuet have made ample and continual use of the *Mémoires et Journal sur la Vie et les Ouvrages de Bossuet*, by the Abbé Le Dieu. A first and most natural inquiry is to know if those Memoirs answer to the expectation formed of them. I shall say at once that they do so only in part; but, such as they are, they will fix with truth, precision, and no exaggeration whatever, in the minds of all readers who will allow them to do so, the

lineaments of that noble and upright figure of Bossuet. Its greatness, towards the end, may suffer a little; I think it does, but its goodness gains.

Let us, however, distinguish a little: there are two divisions in Abbé Le Dieu's work on Bossuet: the *Memoirs* and the *Journal*. The *Memoirs*, written shortly after Bossuet's death, on the spur of the moment as it were, form a broad and animated narrative, a picture of the life, the talents, the virtues of the great bishop. In this work the Abbé Le Dieu takes pains; he writes as if in view of the public; his style is easy, it has development and happy turns of phrase; we feel the man who lived with Bossuet and who speaks of him worthily, with admiration, with emotion. In the *Journal*, on the other hand, written for himself alone and to serve merely as matter for recollection, the abbé shows himself always filled with admiration and respect for the personage to whom he belongs, but his language does not aid those ideas; his revelations are of all kinds and not chosen; they are full of trivialities and platitudes that we regret to see there. The Abbé Le Dieu was a worthy ecclesiastic, hard working, author himself of several works on theological subjects; he was attached to Bossuet in the year 1684, and remained with him for twenty years (the last twenty years of the great prelate's life) in the capacity of private secretary, and with the title of canon of his cathedral church.

Le Dieu's Memoirs, very different from the Journal, are easy to read and copious; they show us Bossuet in his race and genealogy, his childhood and early education, his natural and continued growth. If any one ever seemed born to be a priest in the noblest and worthiest sense of the word, it was he. His pure childhood was followed by a pious adolescence and a youth already consecrated. Eliakim had but to grow, to continue himself in order to become a Jehoiada. The study of belles-lettres, which at first occupied him and in which he excelled, subordinated itself in his mind as soon as he had cast his eyes on the Bible, which happened to him in his rhetoric year. That moment, when he met with and read for the first time a Latin Bible, and the impression of joy and light that he received from it, remained always present with him through life; and he spoke of it in his last hours. He was, it may be said, revealed to himself; he became the child and soon the man of Scripture and the Sacred Word. The wonderful faculties he had received, and which early made themselves known, found their form and satisfaction, without effort, in the grave exercises that filled the life of a young priest and a young teacher — themes, controversies, sermons, conferences; he put all his senses and his beliefs into them, and in them he found his fruition.

What strikes me most in the traits that the Abbé Le Dieu has caught and collected of the early life and

studies of Bossuet, is a first sign, a characteristic already manifest of the future great bishop — something facile and superior, which announces itself and takes position without struggle, without confusion, without interruption, yet without eagerness; it is the most straightforward vocation that can be conceived; his was the least struggling or thwarted soul that ever reached so high a region. He never ceased for a single day to be in his order and to walk his path.

Bossuet's success in the pulpits of Paris, when he went there periodically and rather frequently from Metz, are described by the Abbé Le Dieu with a vivacity and grace we should hardly expect to find in a mere record of sermons. These discourses, so praised by contemporaries that they came to be personified by the first words of their texts, always very happily chosen, the *Depositum custodi*, preached before the queen-mother, and the *Surrexit Paulus*, are made present and distinct to us, each with its particular physiognomy. The sermon called *La Vocation*, preached with the view of confirming the conversion of M. de Turenne (1668), was mentioned by the Carmelites, in whose chapel it was delivered, as a "sermon of exquisite beauty," and the explanations of the Epistles, made in their convent parlour about the same time, are said by them to have been of "enchanted beauty." It should be noticed that all such praises, which recur perpetually under the Abbé Le Dieu's pen, are to the effect that the man whom they

called the "Angel of Meaux" was, as an orator, essentially remarkable for a character of sweetness and unction.

His Funeral Orations, now the most read of his works, have accustomed us to think chiefly of his splendid outbursts and his thunder, although many of those Orations (that on the Princess Palatine, for example) move us more gently and bring tears; but, in general, the first things we picture to ourselves when we think of Bossuet's eloquence are its thunderbolts. His theological duel with Fénelon, and the vigour he put into refuting him to the end and confounding him, have not lessened this idea of him, and have even made him pass for hard. He was not at all so in other matters. In the affair with Fénelon, Bossuet filled his office of teacher and incorruptible guardian of the truth; which, indeed, is a different, but not less essential aspect of the great mind, the wholly sacerdotal soul of Bossuet. I am speaking now of the orator only.

From the mass of testimony collected by Le Dieu, there is no means of doubting that the usual character of Bossuet's discourses, such as he made them with great outflow of heart and lively application of each word to his audience, was to be *touching*, to open the hearts of all as he opened his own, to bring tears; in short, to persuade—the orator's great object. "How is it, monseigneur, that you make yourself so touching?" said the Mesdames de Luynes, those two noble

and saintly nuns of Jouarre. "You turn us as it pleases you, and we cannot resist the charm of your words." Bossuet much preferred to preach the Word of God, in its simplicity and bareness, to the delivery of his celebrated Funeral Orations. "He did not like," says Le Dieu, "the latter work, which is very little useful, though it may shed edification." Feeling that this display and paraphernalia of solemn eloquence fatigued him to no purpose, except that of reputation and fame, he believed he did wrong to his own flock to continue it; therefore, after paying a debt of gratitude to the memory of the Prince de Condé, to which, indeed, friendship obliged him, he publicly announced that on that side his career was closed, reserving henceforth all his inward vigour for the service of his own people.

He was then at the age of which Cicero speaks, when the Roman orator says that his eloquence feels that it whitens: *quum ipsa oratio jam nostra canesce-ret*; he was in haste to employ all his maturity and sweetness for the Christian family entrusted to him. He bound himself to preach at Meaux whenever he officiated pontifically, "and never," says Le Dieu, "did any matter, however urgent it might be, prevent him from going to celebrate the great festivals with his people and proclaim to them the Sacred Word. At such times a father, not a prelate, spoke to his children, and the children made themselves docile and obedient to the voice of their common father."

Bossuet had all styles of eloquence; and this wonderful facility of speech, born of an inward source and fed by study and doctrine, together with the practice he had so early in the employments of the priesthood, explain to a certain point the tranquil composure, the precocious stability of a mind that felt it had only to continue its straight course, for that it was which would lead him to Jerusalem.

There are a dozen pages, among others in the *Memoirs of the Abbé Le Dieu*, which I recommend to my readers; they are those in which he relates, from Bossuet's own lips, having frequently heard him speak on the subject, the manner in which the great orator conceived of eloquence in the pulpit and practised it. Here are the abbé's words, or rather those of Bossuet himself, for Le Dieu is obviously only his interpreter and secretary:

"Considerations of persons present, place, and time determined his choice of subject. Like the Fathers, he adapted his instructions or his reproofs to present needs; that is why, throughout Advent or Lent, he could not prepare himself in the interval between one sermon and the next. For that reason he never took upon himself those great Lents when a sermon must be preached daily. He would have succumbed and been exhausted by the labour, so great was his diligence and his utterance eager. When at work he threw upon paper his plan, his text, his proofs, in French or Latin indifferently, without restraining himself as to words, or turns of expression, or imagery: otherwise, as he was heard to say many times, the action would have languished, and his discourse would have become enervated.

"On this unformed matter he meditated deeply on the morning of the day when he had to speak; usually he wrote no more, in order not to distract his mind, because his imagination always went much faster than his hand could go.

“ Master of all the thoughts that were present in his mind, he fixed in his memory even the expressions that he meant to use; then, collecting himself in the afternoon, he went over his discourse in his head, reading it with the eyes of his mind as though it had been upon paper; changing, adding, cutting out, as if pen in hand. Finally, when he was in the pulpit and pronouncing the words, he followed the impression made upon his audience, and suddenly, effacing voluntarily from his mind what he had meditated, he fastened to the present thought, and drove home the emotion through which he saw upon the faces before him the touched or shaken hearts.”

Such were the meditated improvisations from which Bossuet drew his first great sermons, and to which he continued faithful throughout the whole course of his pastoral homilies. Bossuet, unlike Bourdaloue or Massillon, never repeated his Lenten or Advent addresses; he renewed himself constantly; he was incapable of monotony, of uniformity, even in speaking of that which did not vary; he wanted in his most regular teachings a freshness of life, always present, always to be felt; nothing of the craft, the profession; he wanted action, emotion that was wholly sincere; he needed that his whole soul, his imagination, wooed by the Spirit from on high, should find their place and spread themselves over all on each new occasion; he could not endure in sacred oratory that words and emotions should be arranged and regulated beforehand; it was no longer, he thought, pouring from the source of living waters.

Here is a remarkable fact: even when he composed his Funeral Orations, “ in which there was much narrative and little to change,” or his discourses on doc-

trine, where the explanation of dogma should be clear and concise, "he wrote all," says Le Dieu, "on a paper with two columns, with several different expressions of the great emotions placed side by side, reserving to himself a choice in the heat of utterance, to keep, he said, liberty of action when following his effect upon his auditors; thus turning to their profit the very plaudits they bestowed." The abbé shows him to us at Meaux before he went up into the pulpit and after he came down:

"On his days for preaching, after composing his ideas in his study by reading Holy Scripture, or Saint Augustine, that grand and inexhaustible receptacle of Christian doctrine, he kept himself during divine service in quiet meditation and continual prayer; then, after a few minutes when he shut himself up alone before mounting the pulpit, he began to pour out his soul through his lips and the stream had only to flow. . . . When he had finished, and as if to shelter himself from plaudits, he returned at once to his house and remained there hidden, giving glory to God for his gifts and his mercies, without saying a single word either of his preaching or the success it had had. . . . And the remark to be made as to this," adds Le Dieu, "is on its true and sure character, for he did the same on all occasions. He considered himself as the organ, the channel of the Word, happy if he were the first to profit by it, and never, above all, being elated by his act."

It was in virtue of that same principle of modesty, and of just and rigorous distinction between the man and the deed, that on his death-bed, when the vicar of Varedes expressed astonishment that he should wish to consult him, he to whom God had given such great and vivid light, he answered: "Undeceive yourself; God gives it to a man for others, often leaving him in darkness because of his own conduct."

His perpetual meditation on Holy Scripture, especially after he felt that the end of his life was near, was in keeping with his inward spirit:

“He had taken a great devotion to reciting frequently the 22nd Psalm, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? O thou my succour, haste thee to help me.’ He often went to sleep, and woke up, still meditating on that Psalm, which he called ‘The Psalm of death, the Psalm of abandonment.’”

“Monsieur, I have always thought you an honest man,” said an unbeliever on his death-bed to Bossuet, “I am now about to die; speak to me frankly, I have confidence in you: What do you believe about religion?” “That it is a sure thing, and that I have never had any doubt of it,” replied Bossuet; and the sincerity of those words strikes us in all that we read of him to-day.

There was nothing of the man of letters in Bossuet, using that term in its ordinary meaning; that is to say, he never wrote merely to write, he had no craving to be printed; he generally wrote only when forced to do so by some motive of public utility; to instruct or to refute; and if the motive ceased, he suppressed, or, at any rate, he put away what he had written in a drawer. “Nothing was great in his eyes but defence of the Church and religion.” Such, indeed, he appears to us, more and more, in the picture made of him by the Abbé Le Dieu, and such he continued to his death.

The years when he was tutor to the Dauphin

[Monseigneur, son of Louis XIV], during which he returned to mundane studies in order to teach them, were those in which he occupied himself most with belles-lettres, properly so-called. We find him re-reading Virgil, and reading Homer with special enthusiasm. On these points the Abbé Le Dieu has not, perhaps, all the exactness and knowledge of detail that one desires; but one thing, at least, is very manifest, namely: that profane literature, in taking at that time a large place in Bossuet's studies, hindered no others and encroached on none; its limits were fixed from the beginning; although we are told that he sometimes recited Homer in his sleep, so much had certain passages struck him the evening before; yet he never felt in such reading that buoyant poetic intoxication which in the soul and the charmed imagination of Fénelon produced *Télémaque*. Bossuet, in short, remains for all time the man of the Word of God; he loved that Word; essentially, he loved that only. Isaiah, the Prophets, the Psalms, even the Song of Songs—those were his chosen reading, for ever dear; on them he was happy to grow old and die: *Certe in his consenescere, his immori, summa votorum est*. There was his *Hoc erat in votis*, and, as old age came on, he permitted no diversion to this final occupation, the only one, to his eyes, worthy of the sanctuary.

One never wearies of passing and repassing before that grand figure, which presents the most exact con-

cordance and conformity with the epoch in which it appeared, and over which it may be said to have reigned. Bossuet throughout his whole life walked with his face uncovered; nothing in him, nothing in his actions nor in his thought is in shadow; he was the public man of great institutions and established order; sometimes their organ, sometimes their inspirer, sometimes the censor, accepted by every one, or the conciliator and the umpire. He was the most respected man of those times in the Catholic and Gallican order, and wherever speech could prevail. The words of that speech have come down to us in almost all their beauty—what more can we desire?

IX.

Boileau.

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Boileau.

FOR more than a century since the death of Boileau, long and continual quarrels have been kept up over him. While posterity accepted with unanimous acclamation the fame of Corneille, Molière, Racine, and La Fontaine, it disputed constantly, or reviewed with singular rigour the claims of Boileau to poetic genius; and it was not the fault of Fontenelle, d'Alembert, Helvetius, Condillac, Marмонтel, and, at moments, Voltaire himself, that this great classic renown was not impaired. We know the ground of nearly all the hostilities and antipathies that then assailed it: Boileau had no "sensibility"; and as in the eighteenth century *sentiment* mingled in everything, in a description by Saint-Lambert, in a tale by Crébillon, Jr., in a philosophical history of the two Indias, the fine ladies, the philosophers, and the geometricians took a great aversion to Boileau. Nevertheless, in spite of their epigrams and their scoffing smiles, his literary fame held good, and grew firmer day by day. "The poet of common-sense, the legislator of our Parnassus,"

kept his upper rank. Voltaire's *mot*, "Don't say harm of Nicolas, it brings ill-luck," made its fortune and passed into a proverb; the positive ideas of the eighteenth century and Condillac's philosophy, in triumphing, seemed to set a more durable seal on the fame of the most sensible, most logical, and most accurate of poets.

But it was, above all, when a new school of literature arose, when certain minds, few at first, began to put forward strange and unusual theories, and to apply them in their work, it was then that hatred of innovations brought men back from all sides to Boileau, as to an illustrious ancestor, to whose name they could rally in these encounters. Academicians rivalled one another in pronouncing his eulogy; editions of his works multiplied; distinguished commentators—MM. Viollet-le-Duc, Amar, Saint-Surin—enviored him with assortments of their taste and erudition; M. Daunou in particular, that venerable representative of literature and philosophy in the eighteenth century, gathered around Boileau, with a sort of piety, all the facts, all the judgments, all the apologies, which were attached to so great a cause.

This time, however, the combination of worthy efforts did not sufficiently protect Boileau against the new ideas, at first obscure and decried, but growing and enlarging under the clamours. It was no longer a question, as in the eighteenth century, of



NICOLAS BOILEAU.
From a steel engraving.

piquant epigrams and satirical personalities; it was a strong and serious attack against the principles and the very foundations of Boileau's poetic art; it was a wholly literary examination of his devices and his style; a severe inquiry on the qualities of a poet, and whether they were or were not in him. Epigrams were no longer in season; so many had been made upon him formerly that it became bad taste to repeat them. I shall have no difficulty in avoiding them in the few pages I can here devote to him; pages in which I shall not seek to make a full examination, or to offer definitive conclusions. It is enough to talk freely of Boileau with my readers, to study him in his privacy, to look at him in detail, according to our point of view and the ideas of the present day, passing alternately from the man to the author, from the *bourgeois* of Auteuil to the poet of Louis the Great, not evading the great questions of art and style, elucidating them possibly, but without pretending ever to solve them. It is well, at each new literary epoch, to go over in our minds and revive the ideas that are represented by certain names that have become sacramental, even if we change nothing in them, very much as in each new reign new coins are struck on which the effigy is renewed without altering the weight.

In these days a lofty and philosophical method is introduced into all the branches of history. When it becomes a question of judging the life, actions, and

writings of a celebrated man, we begin by examining and describing the epoch that preceded his coming, the society that received him into its midst, the general trend of minds; we observe and arrange, as a preliminary, the great stage on which the personage is to play his part; from the moment he appears, all the developments of the force within him, all the obstacles, all the repercussions are foreseen and explained; and from this harmonious spectacle there comes by degrees into the soul of the reader a peaceful satisfaction in which his intellect reposes. This method never triumphs with more complete and brilliant evidence than when it resuscitates statesmen, conquerors, theologians, philosophers; when applied to poets and artists, men of retirement and solitude, exceptions become frequent, and one has need to be cautious. For while, in the orders of other ideas — politics, religion, philosophy — each man, each work, takes its own rank, all make sound and number, the common beside the passable, and the passable beside the excellent, in art nothing counts but the excellent; and observe that the excellent in art may always be an exception, an accident of nature, a caprice of heaven, a gift of God. You may make fine and legitimate reasonings and deductions on prosaic races and epochs; and lo! it pleases God that Pindar should issue from Beotia and that André Chénier should be born and die in the eighteenth century. No doubt these peculiar aptitudes, these wonderful faculties,

received at birth, co-ordinate themselves sooner or later with the epoch into which they are cast, and are subjected to certain lasting impressions. But even here, the human initiative is in the first rank and is less subject to general causes; human energy modifies and, if I may so express it, assimilates things; besides, does it not suffice an artist, in order to accomplish his destiny, to create himself a haven, however obscure, in the great movement around him, to find some forgotten corner where he can weave his web in peace, or make his honey? It seems to me that when we speak of an artist or a poet, especially a poet who does not represent an entire epoch, it is better not to complicate his history with too vast a philosophical baggage, but to keep, in the beginning, to private character, the domestic relations, and to follow the individual closely through his inner self; sure that later, when we know him well, we can bring him into a strong light and confront him with his epoch. This is what I wish to do very simply for Boileau.

Son of a father who was a clerk of court and of lawyer ancestors (1636), as he says himself in his tenth epistle, Boileau passed his childhood and his early youth in the rue de Jérusalem, in a house built in the days of Henri IV; having thus before his eyes the *bourgeois* life and the life of the law courts. He lost his mother when very young, the family was numerous, and his father much occupied; the child was left to himself and lodged in the corner of a

garret. His health was injured by it, but his talent for observation must have profited; sickly and taciturn, he noticed everything; and as he had not the dreamy turn of mind and his childhood and youth had never known tenderness, he early accustomed himself to look at life with common-sense, severity, and caustic bluntness. He was soon sent to school, where he was finishing his course in the fourth class when attacked by the stone; it was necessary to operate, and the operation left him with a very great infirmity that lasted all the rest of his life.

In school Boileau read, besides the classic authors, much modern poesy and many novels; and although he himself wrote, after the custom of rhetoricians, some rather bad tragedies, his taste and his talent for verses were already recognised by his masters. After graduating in philosophy, he was put to study law; on his father's death he continued to live with his brother Jérôme (who had inherited his father's office of clerk of the court), made himself a lawyer, but soon, weary of pettifogging, tried theology without more taste for it, or more success. He obtained a benefice of only 800 *livres*, which he resigned after a few years in favour, it is said, of the demoiselle Marie Poncher de Bretouville, with whom he had been in love, and who had made herself a nun. Apart from this attachment, which some have doubted, it does not appear that Boileau's youth was ardent, and he himself has stated that he was "very little voluptuous." These few

known facts on the twenty-four first years of his life bring us to the year 1660, the period when he entered the literary world by the publication of his first Satires.

His exterior circumstances thus given, the political and social state of the country being known, it is easy to conceive what was the influence on a nature like that of Boileau of this early education, and of the domestic habits about him. Nothing tender, nothing maternal around the sickly and desolate child; nothing inspiring or sympathetic in the litigious conversations that went on around the armchair of his father, the old clerk, nor in the habits and ideas of a *bourgeois* family. No doubt the soul of a dreamy child might, in some period of analysis and inward examination, have gathered food and strength from this obstruction and repression; but the soul of Boileau was not fitted to do so. There was, it is true, the resource of mockery and burlesque. Villon and Regnier had already poured out abundant poetic ridicule on the manners and morals of the *bourgeoisie*, on that very life of citizens and pettifoggers; but Boileau had decorum in his mockery, sobriety in his smile, and they forbade him the witty debaucheries of his predecessors. Besides, manners and morals had lost their saliency since the regulating force of Henri IV had rolled over them, and Louis XIV was about to impose decorum.

As for any loftily poetic and religious effect of

splendid public buildings upon a young life begun between Notre-Dame and the Sainte-Chapelle, it is useless to think of it as possible in those days. The feeling of the middle-ages was completely lost; the soul of a Milton could alone have perceived something of it; Boileau saw nothing but a cathedral of fat canons and a choir-boy. Consequently, what was it that came suddenly, and for a first essay, of the glow, the fancy of his twenty-four years, of that poet's existence long so miserable, so repressed? Not the pious and sublime sadness of the *Penseroso* wandering by night, in tears, beneath the Gothic cloisters and the solitary arcades; nor the vigorous onslaught of a Regnier on nocturnal orgies in the dark alleys and the spiral stairways of the Cité; not the soft and unctuous poesy of the family hearth like that of La Fontaine at Ducis; no, it was "Damon, the great author," bidding farewell to the town, after Juvenal; it was satire on the intricacy of the streets of Paris; it was sharp and wholesome sarcasm on the wretched rhymers who swarmed in those days, having usurped a reputation in the town and at Court. Like his caustic elder brother, Gilles Boileau, he made war upon the Cotins and their like. He had, for his sole instigation, "the hatred of silly books."

I have just said that the feeling of the middle-ages was lost; it did not survive in France till the sixteenth century; the Greek and Roman invasion of the Renaissance smothered it. Nevertheless, while this great

and long neglect of the middle-ages was working to an end (which did not happen till the close of the eighteenth century), while the really modern era for society and for art in particular was still awaited, France, scarcely recovered from the agitations of the League and the Fronde, was slowly creating for herself a literature, a poesy, tardy no doubt, and somewhat artificial, but a mixture skilfully blended, original in its imitation, and beautiful still in the decline of a society the ruins of which it draped. Drama apart, we may consider Malherbe and Boileau as the authors, official and authorised, of the poetic movement produced during the last two centuries at the summit and on the surface of French society. They are both distinguished by a powerful infusion of critical wit, and by a pitiless opposition to their immediate predecessors. Malherbe is inexorable for Ronsard, Des Portes, and their disciples, as Boileau was for Colletet, Ménage, Chapelain, Benserade, and Scudéry.

This rigour, especially that of Boileau, may often call itself by the name of justice: nevertheless, even when they are right, Malherbe and Boileau are so in the rather vulgar manner of common-sense; that is to say, without the force of passion, without principles, with incomplete and insufficient views. They are empirical; they attack real vices, but exterior ones, the symptoms of a poesy that is rotten at the core; to regenerate it they do not go to the heart of the evil. Because Ronsard, Scudéry, and Chapelain seem to

them detestable, they conclude that there was no true taste, no real poesy among those ancients; they ignore and suppress out and out the great renovators of the art of poesy in the middle-ages; they judge blindly by a few passages in Petrarch, a few *concetti* of Tasso, to which the wits of the time of Henri III and Louis XIII were attached. And when, with their notions of reform, they decided to return to the antiquity of Greece and Rome, always faithful to that incomplete logic of common-sense, which never dares to drive things to a conclusion, they preferred the Romans to the Greeks; the age of Augustus presented to them at once the type of the absolutely beautiful.

However, these uncertainties and inconsistencies were inevitable in an episodical epoch, under a reign that was, in a way, accidental, and which never plunged deeply into either the past or the future. The arts, instead of living and cohabiting in the bosom of the same sphere, and being gathered back perpetually to the common centre of their rays, were isolated, each, on its own line and at its own extremity, acting solely on the surface. Perrault, Mansart, Lulli, Le Brun, Boileau, Vauban, though they had among them, in manner and method, general points of resemblance, had no understanding with one another, and did not sympathise, imprisoned as they were in the *technique* of their own work. In periods truly *palingenetic* it is quite the contrary; Phidias, whom Homer inspired, supplements Sophocles by his chisel;

Orcagna commentates Petrarch or Dante with his brush; Chateaubriand understands Bonaparte. But let us return to Boileau. It would be too harsh to apply to him alone the observations that should fall upon his century, but in which he has, necessarily, a large share in his quality of critical poet and literary legislator.

That is, in truth, the rôle and the position that Boileau assumes in his first essays. From 1664, that is to say from his twenty-eighth year, we find him intimately allied with all that the literature of that day could show of best and most illustrious; with La Fontaine and Molière, already celebrated, with Racine, whose guide and counsellor he became. The dinners in the rue du Vieux-Colombier took place weekly, and Boileau bore the palm for criticism. He frequented the best company, that of M. de La Rochefoucauld, of Mesdames de La Fayette and de Sévigné; knew the Lamoignons, the Vivonnes, the Pomponnes, and among them all his decisions in matters of taste were law. Presented at Court in 1669, he was appointed historiographer in 1677; at the latter period, through the publication of nearly all his satires and his epistles, of *l'Art poétique* and the first four cantos of the *Lutrin*, he had attained the climax of his reputation.

Boileau was forty-one years old when he was made historiographer; and it may be said that his literary career ended at that age. During the fifteen years that followed, down to 1693, he published nothing

but the last two cantos of the *Lutrin*; and from that time to the end of his life (1711), that is, for eighteen years, he did no more than the satire *Sur les Femmes*, the epistles *à ses Vers*, *à Antoine*, and *Sur l'Amour de Dieu*, together with the satires *Sur l'Homme* and *Sur l'Équivoque*. We must look into his private life for the explanation of these irregularities; from it we may gather certain considerations on the nature and quality of his talent.

During the period of his growing fame, Boileau continued to lodge in the house of his brother, the clerk, Jérôme Boileau. This home must have been little agreeable for a poet, the wife of Jérôme being, it was said, crabbed and a scold. In 1679, on Jérôme's death, he went to live for a few years with his nephew, Dongois, also a clerk; but after making (in a carriage) the campaigns in Flanders and Alsace, he was enabled by the king's liberality to buy a little house at Auteuil, where we find him installed in 1687.¹ His health, always very delicate, became worse, and he suffered from an extinction of voice and deafness, which unfitted him for society and a Court life.

It is by following Boileau into his solitude at Auteuil that we learn to know him best; it is by observing what he did and did not do then, during more than twenty years, delivered over to himself, feeble in body but

¹ It was then that he took the name of his little property, Des Préaux, to distinguish him from his brothers. He is called, in all the memoirs of the time, M. Despréaux.

sound in mind, and in the centre of a smiling landscape, that we can judge with truth and certainty of his earlier productions and assign the limits of his faculties. Well! must we say it, strange, unheard-of thing?—during this long sojourn in the country, a prey to infirmities of the body which, leaving the soul clear, disposed him to sadness and revery, not one word of conversation, not one line of correspondence, not one verse betrays in Boileau a tender emotion, a true and simple feeling for the Nature around him. No, it is not indispensable, in order to rouse us to a deep and vivid sense of Nature's things, to go afar, beyond the seas, through countries beloved of the sun, the lands of the lemon and the orange, floating all night in a gondola in Venice or at Baia, at the feet of an Elvire or a Guiccioli—no, much less suffices. Look at Horace, how he contents himself, for his reveries, with a little field, a tiny spring of living water, a bit of forest above, *et paulùm sylvæ super his foret*: Look at La Fontaine, how he loves to sit down and forget himself for long hours beneath an oak; how marvellously he understands the woods, the waters, the fields, the warrens, and the rabbits nibbling thyme in the dew, the farms with the smoke rising from their chimneys, the dove-cotes, and the poultry-yards. And that good Ducis, who, himself, lived at Auteuil, how he loves and how he paints the little smiling hollows and the hillsides! “I walked a league this morning,” he wrote to a friend, “over plains of heather and

sometimes among bushes covered with blossoms and singing." Nothing of all that in Boileau. What then does he do at Auteuil? He takes care of his health, he gives hospitality to his friends, he plays at skittles, he talks, after his wine, of Court news, the Academy, the Abbé Cotin, Charpentier, or Perrault, just as Nicole talked theology under the charming leafage of Port-Royal; he writes to Racine, asking him to kindly recall him to the memory of the king and Mme. de Maintenon; he tells him he is composing an ode in which he "risks things that are very novel, even to speaking of the white plume the king wears on his hat." The best thing he does is assuredly a clever epistle to Antoine; and even in that the good gardener is transformed into "the governor of the garden"; he does not plant, he "directs" the yew and the honeysuckle, he "exercises" on the wall-fruit the "art of la Quintinie"—there was Versailles even at Auteuil!

But Boileau grew old, his infirmities increased, his friends died; La Fontaine and Racine were taken from him. Let us say to his praise, at this moment when we are judging his talent with some severity, that he was more sensitive to friendship than to any other affection. In a letter, dated 1695, and addressed to M. de Mancroix on the subject of La Fontaine's death, we find this passage, almost the only touching words to be found in Boileau's whole correspondence:

"It seems to me, monsieur, that this is a very long letter. But the truth is, the leisure that I now have at Auteuil lets me, as it were,

transport myself to Reims, where I imagine that I am talking with you in your garden, and see you again, as formerly, with all the dear friends whom we have lost and who have disappeared *velut somnium surgentis*."

To the infirmities of age were added a lawsuit unpleasant to carry on, and a sense of the public misfortunes. After the death of Racine, Boileau never set foot in Versailles; he judged sadly of men and things; and even in the matter of taste, decadence seemed to him so rapid that he went as far as to regret the days of Bonnet and Pradon. What one has difficulty in understanding is the fact that in his last days he sold his house at Auteuil, and went to die (1711) in the cloister of Notre-Dame, in the quarters of his confessor, the canon Lenoir. His principal motive, no doubt, was piety, as stated in the "Necrology of Port-Royal"; but economy also had something to do with it, for he was fond of money. The old age of the poet-historiographer was not less sad and morose than that of the monarch.

Boileau was not a poet, if we restrict that title to beings strongly endowed with imagination and soul; though his *Lutrin* reveals a talent capable of invention and, above all, of picturesque beauties of detail. Boileau, as I see him, was a man of shrewd and sensible mind, polished and sarcastic; not fruitful; agreeably abrupt; a religious observer of good taste; a good writer of verse; learnedly correct, wittily gay, the oracle of the Court, and of Letters in those days; just such as was needed to please on all sides—Patru

and Bussy, d'Aguesseau and Mme. de Sévigné, M. Arnauld and Mme. de Maintenon,—to impose on young courtiers, and make himself acceptable to old ones, and be esteemed by all as an honest man of merit. He is the “poet-author,” knowing how to converse and to live, but truthful, irascible at the very idea of falsity; taking fire on behalf of the right, and attaining sometimes, through a sentiment of literary equity, to a species of moral sympathy and luminous resplendency, as in his Epistle to Racine. The latter represented well the tender and passionate side of Louis XIV and his Court; Boileau represents not less perfectly the sustained gravity, the upright good sense rising to nobleness, and the decent order of Court and monarch. Boileau's literature and poetic art are marvellously in accord with religion, philosophy, political economy, strategy, and all the arts of the day; it is the same mixture of sound sense and insufficiency, of views provisionally right, but seldom decidedly so.¹

The point of view as to all that concerns Boileau has changed very much during the twenty-five years just passed. When, under the Restoration, at that brilliant moment of valorous attempts and hopes, younger generations came upon the scene, striving to inspire new life into style and form, and to extend the circle of literary ideas and comparisons, they met

¹ The foregoing was written in April, 1829. It did not wholly satisfy the writer, and in September, 1852, twenty-three years later, he returned to the subject in what here follows.—Tr.

with resistance from their predecessors. Estimable, but hide-bound writers, with other writers less estimable, who would certainly have been in Boileau's day those he would have begun by castigating, put forward the name of that legislator of Parnassus, and without considering the differences of epochs and centuries, quoted his verses on all occasions as though they were the articles of a code. I did then what it was natural to do; I took the Works of Boileau by themselves; though not numerous, they are of unequal strength; some show the youth, others the old age of the writer. While doing justice to his fine and wholesome parts, I did not do it amply, nor did I associate myself heartily with the spirit of the man. Boileau as a personage and an authority is far more to be considered than his work; and it needs a certain effort to grasp him as a whole. In a word, I did not then do a full historical work upon him; I remained with one foot in polemics.

To-day, with the circle of experiences accomplished, and discussions exhausted, I return to him with pleasure. If it is permissible to speak of myself, I would say that Boileau is one of the men who have most occupied my mind since I have written criticism, and the one with whom I have most lived in idea. I have often thought of what he was, recalling what seemed lacking to me at an earlier time; and to-day I can speak of him, I venture to say, with a very keen and very present feeling.

Born November 1, 1636, in Paris, in the rue de Jérusalem, opposite to the house that was the cradle of Voltaire, Nicolas Boileau was the fourteenth child of his father, clerk of the Grand Chamber of the Parliament of Paris. Losing his mother at an early age, he knew nothing of the tender care that usually brightens childhood. His first studies were hindered by an operation for the stone. His father destined him for the Church, and he was tonsured. He did his theology at the Sorbonne, disliked it, and after going through a course of law, was called to the bar. In his twenty-first year he lost his father, who left him some fortune, enough to make him independent of clients and publishers, and, his genius goading him, he gave himself wholly to Letters, to poesy, and, among other styles of poesy, to satire. In that family of clerks and lawyers a satirical genius circulated. Two brothers of Boileau, Gilles and Jacques, were both stamped with that same characteristic in different forms, which it is piquant to notice here, because they serve better to define the illustrious younger brother.

Gilles Boileau, lawyer and rhymester, who belonged to the Academy twenty-five years before his brother Nicolas, was one of those *bourgeois* and malicious wits aiming for high society as a follower of Boisrobert, a hornet race engendered by the Fronde, who sported gaily during the ministry of Mazarin. Scarron, against whom he had made a rather witty epigram, defined him in a letter to Fouquet thus: "Boileau, well known

to-day for his backbiting, for his treachery to M. Ménage, and for the civil war he caused in the Academy, is a young man who began early to damage himself, and has since contrived to damage others." Gilles Boileau, when travelling, carried the "Satires" of Regnier in his carpetbag; usually he took up his station before the third pillar in the great hall of the Palais [law courts], setting the tone to the young wits among the lawyers. He was called "Boileau, the grammarian," and "Boileau, the critic." This is enough to show that he lacked only more solidity and more taste to have played the part of his brother Nicolas; humour and satirical intention were not wanting in him.

Jacques Boileau, otherwise called the Abbé Boileau, doctor of the Sorbonne, long dean of the church at Sens, subsequently canon of the Sainte-Chapelle, was also of the same nature, but with traits that were franker and more spontaneous. He had the gift of repartee and witty sayings. It was he who, hearing a Jesuit say that Pascal, then in retirement at Port-Royal-des-Champs, was making shoes, like those Messieurs, for penance, promptly said: "I don't know, Reverend Father, whether he is making shoes, but you must admit that he has delivered you a famous *botte*" [thrust]. When he was performing the service in the Sainte-Chapelle he sang with both sides of the choir, and always out of time and tune. He was fond of strange subjects and titles for his books, such

as: "History of the Flagellants," and "Short Coat of Ecclesiastics"; his Latin, for he usually wrote in that language, was harsh, fantastic, and anomalous. With his puns and his gaiety he makes me think of his brother Nicolas when the latter was facetious and in good humour. He resembled him in face, but with some exaggeration and caricature. Except for powers of reasoning, he was equal to him in mind. One day the great Condé, passing through the town of Sens, which was in his government of Bourgogne, was complimented by the Guilds and Companies of the town. Caustic as usual, he made game of those who were paying him compliments.

"His greatest pleasure," says a contemporary, "was to do some malicious thing to the complimenters on such occasions. The Abbé Boileau, who was dean of the cathedral church at Sens, was obliged to make a speech at the head of his Chapter. M. le Prince, wishing to disconcert the orator, whom he did not know, affected to advance his head and his big nose close to the dean, as if to hear him better, but really to make him blunder in his speech, if he could. But the abbé, who perceived his malice, pretended to be abashed and overcome, and began his speech thus, with affected terror: 'Monseigneur, your Highness must not be surprised to see me confused and trembling in appearing before you at the head of a company of ecclesiastics, for if I was at the head of an army of thirty thousand men I should tremble much more.' M. le Prince, charmed with that beginning, embraced the orator, would not let him finish, asked his name, and when told that he was the brother of M. Despréaux, he redoubled his caresses and kept him to dinner."

The Abbé Boileau seems to me to possess the brusquerie, the dart and thrust of his brother, without his refinement and his serious and judicial application

of his wit. The originality of Nicolas Boileau, being of this mocking and satirical family, was that he joined to hereditary malice a portion of sound common-sense, so that those who had dealings with him, like Mathieu Marais, could say: "There is pleasure in listening to that man; he is reason incarnate."

In considering this line of brothers, alike, yet unequal, it seems to me that Nature, that great generator of talents, made a first sketch of Nicolas when she created Gilles; there she stopped, repentant; then she took up her crayon again and drew a bold stroke in making Jacques; but that time the stroke was too hard. The third time that she set to work the result was good: Gilles is the sketch, Jacques is the caricature, Nicolas is the portrait.

In his first Satires, composed and put in circulation in 1660, in those that followed almost immediately, and in the Satire dedicated to Molière in 1664, Boileau shows himself a skilful versifier, more exact and scrupulous than others of his day, much preoccupied in presenting elegantly certain special details relating to *bourgeois* citizens and poetasters; never approaching mankind or life on the side of feelings, like Racine and La Fontaine, nor on the side of moral and philosophical humorous observation, like La Fontaine again, and Molière; he does it from a point of view less extended, less fertile, but agreeable, nevertheless, and pungent. He was the author by profession, the poet of the Cité and the Place Dauphine, who placed himself in judg-

ment over the illustrious writers spread out for sale at Barbin's, in the gallery of the Palais.

In his "Satires" and in his "Epistles," Boileau constantly lets us see the labour and the deliberations of his mind. In his youth it was always so ; there was something captious, capricious, vexed in young Boileau's muse; it never had the emotional ring of youth; it was grey-haired from the start; this became him as he matured, and in his second period he seems younger than at first, for all is then in keeping. This moment of maturity in Boileau is also the period when he affords the most pleasure. If he has any *charm*, properly so called, it is at this time only, the period of the first four cantos of the *Lutrin* and of the Epistle to Racine.

Boileau's muse, looked at rightly, had nothing of youth but courage and audacity. He needed both to attempt his enterprise, which was nothing less than to say to the literary men most in vogue, to the academicians who possessed the most influence: "You are bad authors, or, at any rate, very mixed authors. You write haphazard; out of ten verses, twenty verses, a hundred verses, you sometimes have only one or two that are good; and those are drowned in the bad taste, the loose style, the insipidity of the rest." Boileau's work was, not to return to Malherbe, already far behind, but to make French poesy submit to a reform of the same kind that Pascal had introduced into French prose. It is from Pascal, above

all and before all, that Boileau, it seems to me, derives; one might say that he is the child in literature of the *Provinciales*. The poetical and critical purpose of Boileau is very well defined in the following words:

“To guide and elevate French poesy which (excepting two or three names), was going at random, and was decadent; to lead it up to the level where the *Provinciales* had carried prose; but to maintain, nevertheless, the exact limits and distinctions of the two classes. Pascal scoffed at our poesy and its conventional tinsel: ‘golden age,’—‘marvels of our time,’—‘fateful laurels,’—‘beauteous star.’—And they call that jargon, he says, poetic beauty!”

The question for Boileau was to render poesy respectable to the Pascals, and to allow nothing that sound judgment could reprove.

We must represent to ourselves the exact state of French poesy when Boileau appeared, and take it first among the best and greatest names: Molière, with his genius, rhyming at full speed; La Fontaine, with his carelessness, leaving the reins loose (especially in his first manner); the great Corneille, letting his verses go as they would and never retouching them. Thus Boileau was the first to apply to the poetic style Pascal's method for the prose style: “If I write four words, I efface three.” He goes back to Malherbe's law and gives it fresh vigour; he extends it and adapts it to his epoch; he teaches it to his young friend Racine, who without it might sometimes have gone amiss; he recalls it to La Fontaine, already mature, and inculcates it on him; he even

brings Molière to think of it twice in his most perfected plays in verse. Boileau understood, and made his friends understand, that "a few admirable verses do not justify the neglect of others that surround them." Such is the true definition of his literary work.

But this one thought and purpose was fitted to kill that crowd of fashionable *beaux-esprits* and rhymesters, who owed a few happy lines to chance and to the multitude of their pen-strokes, and who were living on that credit and on tolerance. Also it struck no less directly the ceremonious and pompous oracles who had gained an imposing credit at Court by the help of an erudition without nicety of judgment and without taste. Chapelain was the leader of that old party still reigning. One of Boileau's first cares was to dislodge him in the estimation of Colbert, under whom Chapelain was a sort of head clerk of Letters, and to make him ridiculous in the eyes of all as a writer.

God knows what scandal was caused by this audacity of the young man! The Montausiers, the Huets, the Pellissons, the Scudérys shuddered; but Colbert comprehended, and that sufficed; it was enough that the minister understood the daring judge, that he laughed as he read and heard him, and that in the midst of his grave and heavy labours the mere sight of Boileau made him merry. Boileau was one of the rare and legitimate amusements of Colbert. Boileau has so long been presented to us in our youth as

frowning and severe that we find it difficult to imagine him as he was in reality—the liveliest of serious minds, and the most agreeable of censors.

To put myself still more in his presence I went yesterday to see, in the Museum of Sculpture, the fine bust made of him by Girardon. He is there treated in a free, broad manner; the ample and indispensable wig is nobly placed on his forehead, and does not overweight it; his attitude is firm and even proud, the carriage of the head confident; a satirical half-smile flickers on his lips; the line of the nose, a little turned up, and that of the mouth indicate a jesting, laughing, satirical habit; the lips, however, are kind and frank, half-open and speaking, as if they could not withhold the jest. The bared neck gives to view a double chin, which is, nevertheless, more allied to thinness than to embonpoint; the neck, a little hollow, is in keeping with the weariness of voice which had troubled him from childhood. But seeing him as a whole, how thoroughly we feel that the living man must have been the contrary of sad or sombre, and not in the least wearisome!

Before taking to this rather solemn wig himself, young Boileau had pulled off more than one from other heads. I shall not repeat what is well known to all, but here is a little story which has never, as I believe, reached print. One day Racine, who was readily mischievous when the fancy took him, thought it would be an excellent trick to take Boileau to pay a

visit to Chapelain, who lived in the rue des Cinq-Diamants in the Lombard quarter. Racine had reason to be grateful to Chapelain, having received encouragement from him on his earliest odes. Using, therefore, the access he had to that learned personage, he presented Boileau to him as M. *le bailli* de Chevreuse, who, being in Paris, wished to become acquainted with so important a personage. Chapelain suspected nothing; but, in the course of the visit, the *bailli*, who was presented to him as an amateur of literature, having turned the conversation upon the drama, Chapelain, learned man that he was, declared his preference for Italian comedies, and extolled them to the prejudice of Molière. Boileau could not contain himself; in vain did Racine make signs to him; the pretended *bailli* took fire and was on the point of betraying himself. His introducer hastened to cut short the interview. On leaving, they encountered the Abbé Cotin on the staircase, but luckily he did not recognise the *bailli*. Such were Boileau's early pranks. The point is: if such be played at all, to place them judiciously.

Boileau's "Satires" are not, in these days, the most pleasing of his works. The subjects are rather petty, but, when the author takes them on the moral side, they turn to commonplace; such as the Satire addressed to the Abbé Le Vayer on human follies, and that to Dangeau on nobility. In the Satire and in his "Epistles," the moment that works of the intellect

are not the special topic, Boileau is very inferior to Horace and to Pope; and incomparably so to Molière and La Fontaine; he becomes a mere ordinary moralist, an honest man of good sense, who is superior only in details and in the portraits that he introduces. His best Satire is the IXth. "It is perhaps the masterpiece of its class," says Fontanes. This masterpiece of satire is addressed to his *Esprit*, a favourite topic, always the same, rhymes, method of writing, portrait of his own imagination; he paints himself more fully, with more development than ever, with a fire that lights up his figure marvellously, and makes him for all future time the living type of the critic.

Boileau's sensibility went, very early, into his reason and remained one with it. His passion (for in this direction he had passion) was wholly critical and exhaled itself in his judgments. "The true in works of the mind"—that idea was at all times his mistress, his Bérénice. When his upright sense was shocked he could not contain himself. Speaking in that Satire of Truth he says:

" 'Twas she who in pointing the road I should follow
Taught me hatred of books that are silly and hollow."

The "hatred of silly books," and also the love and worship of good and beautiful works, was the lesson he learned. When Boileau praises with full and heartfelt meaning, how moved he is, and how he moves us! how passionate and affectionate his lines:

“ In vain 'gainst ‘The Cid’ may the ministry league,
All Paris for Chimène has the eyes of Rodrigue;
In vain may the learned Academy censure it,
The public, rebellious, resolves to admire it.”

How generous the tone! how the eyebrows frown! The grey eyes glitter with a tear; his verse is that of wholesome satire, which “purifies itself in the rays of good sense”—for good sense is there, with warmth, and glow, and light. The Epistle to Racine after the production of *Phèdre* should be read; it is a magnificent triumph of the sane sentiment of justice, a masterpiece of critical poesy, alternately sparkling, inflaming, harmonious, affecting, and fraternal. But above all, his beautiful lines on the death of Molière should be re-read—lines on which there must have fallen an avenging tear, a tear of Boileau.

We reach, in the Epistle to Racine, the height of Boileau's glory and of his vocation. He rises there to his highest rank, the centre of a group of the illustrious of the epoch; calm, equitable, sure, powerfully firm in his own style, which he has gradually enlarged, envying no one, distributing soberly his awards, classing even those who are above him—*his dantem jura Catonem*; master of the choir, as Montaigne says; one of those men to whom authority is delegated, and whose every word bears weight.

We can distinguish three periods in Boileau's career: the first, which extends to about the year 1667, is that of the pure satirist, of the audacious, morose

young man, rather narrow in his views, just escaping from a lawyer's office and still too close to the courts, busy with rhyming and ridiculing silly rhymers, in putting them in the pillory of his hemistichs, in painting in relief, and with precision, the external absurdities of his quarter, and in naming very loudly the pretenders of his acquaintance: "I call a cat a cat, and Rolet a swindler."

The second period, that from 1669 to 1677, includes the satirist still, but a satirist who grows more and more placable; showing circumspection and discretion as he reaches fame; already on a good footing at Court; becoming more wisely critical in every sense, legislator of Parnassus in his *Art Poétique*, and more philosophical in his broader view of man (Epistle to Guilleragues), capable of delightful idleness and the varied enjoyments of country life (Epistle to M. de Lamoignon), whose imagination, reposed but not cooled, still combines and invents fearless pictures, profound in their jocoseness, of a skill that rises to supreme perfection, to immortal art. The first four cantos of the *Lutrin* express the spirit and mind of Boileau in his honest leisure, in his serenity and his freest play, in the pleasant calmness and the first glow of his after-dinner leisure.

During the third period, coming after an inaction of several years, under pretext of his office as historiographer and on account of illness, extinction of voice, both physical and poetical, Boileau made a

moderately successful return to poesy (not so deplorable as persons have chosen to say) in the last two cantos of the *Lutrin*, in his final "Epistles" and "Satires," *L'Amour de Dieu*, and the melancholy *Équivoque* ending all.

There again, ideas and subjects fail him more, perhaps, than talent. Even in his disagreeable Satire against women, I have heard the most ardent admirers of the modern picturesque school commend the picture of sordid avarice so hideously shown in the persons of Tardieu and his wife. In that Satire there are some fifty lines *à la* Juvenal, which do not pale as we read them, even after we have read *Eugénie Grandet* or looked at some startling canvas of Eugène Delacroix.

But of this third and last period of Boileau, in which he allied himself more closely with Port-Royal and the Jansenist cause, I shall say but little here, the subject being too private and thankless. Moreover, it is one that I have long laid aside for the future.¹

What was Boileau at Court and in society in his best days, before increasing infirmities and a gloomy old age overtook him? He was full of frank speech, witty sayings, and repartee; he spoke with ardour, but solely on subjects that he had at heart, that is to say, on literary matters. The talk once launched upon them, he put no restraint upon himself. Mme. de Sévigné tells us of a dinner at which Boileau,

¹ See "History of Port-Royal," vol. v., book vi., chap. 7.

arguing with a Jesuit on the subject of Pascal, gave a scene of most excellent and naïve comedy at the expense of the priest. Boileau carried his verses in his mind, and recited them long before he put them on paper; in fact, he did better than recite them, he acted them, so to speak. One day, being in bed (for he rose late), he repeated to Arnould, who came to see him, the whole of his third Epistle, in which occurs the fine passage that ends with the words:

“Hasten! time is flying and drags us with it:
This moment when I speak is gone already.”

He recited those last lines in so airy and rapid a tone that Arnould, naïf and ardent, easily moved, and a good deal of a novice in the beauties of French poesy, jumped from his chair and made two or three turns about the room as if in pursuit of the flying moment. In the same way, Boileau recited to Père La Chaise his theological Epistle on the love of God in such a way that he obtained (a more difficult matter) his entire approbation.

“Doctors ought to order champagne,” said Boileau, “to those who have no intellect, just as they order asses’ milk to those who have no health; the first remedy would be surer than the other.” Boileau, in his best days, did not hate champagne, good cheer, and the bustle of social life; he spared himself less in that respect than his friend Racine, who took care of his health to excess, and was always in fear of falling

iii. Boileau had more animation in society, more social spirits than Racine; he let himself go to its pleasures. Until he was quite advanced in life he received those who liked to listen to him and to make a circle round him with pleasure. "He is happy as a king," said Racine, "in his solitude, or rather his inn at Auteuil. I call it so, because there is never a day when there is not some new guest, often two or three, who do not even know each other. He is happy in adapting himself thus to everybody. As for me, I should have sold that house a hundred times." Boileau ended by selling it, but only after his infirmities had made life in it more difficult, and conversation positively painful. The extinction of voice, which sent him to the Baths of Bourbon in the summer of 1687, brought out the interest that the great people of the kingdom took in him. The king at table often inquired about his health; the princes and princesses also: "You were," writes Racine, "the topic of conversation during half the dinner."

In 1677 Boileau was appointed, with Racine, to write the History of the king's campaigns. At first, the courtiers made merry at the sight of the two poets, on horseback, following the army, or in the trenches, conscientiously studying the subject. A thousand tales, true or false, and doubtless much embellished, were told about them. Here is one which is quite new; I take it from an unpublished letter of Père Quesnel to Arnauld; this time the two

poets are not with the army, but simply at Versailles, where, nevertheless, the following misadventure overtook them:

“Mme. de Montespan,” writes Père Quesnel in 1680, “has two bears, which come and go as they please. They passed one night in a magnificent apartment that was being prepared for Mlle. de Fontanges. The painters, on leaving their work at night, forgot to close the doors; those who have charge of the apartments were as careless as the painters; so the bears, finding the doors open, went in and ruined everything. The next day it was said that the bears had avenged their mistress, and other poetic nonsense. Those who ought to have closed the doors were well scolded, so they resolved to close them early in future. As much was said about the great damage done by the bears, great numbers of people went to see it, MM. Despréaux [Boileau] and Racine among them, towards evening. Going from room to room, absorbed in curiosity, or in pleasant conversation, they took no notice when the outer doors were locked, so that when they wanted to leave they could not do so. They shouted through the windows, but nobody heard them. Finally, the two poets *bravouacked* where the bears had the night before, and had leisure to think of their past poesy or their future History.”

This tale shows that the subject of Boileau is not so uniformly grave and sad as one might think. Louis XIV, in protecting Boileau by his esteem, would not have allowed him to be seriously hurt by the Court jesters. The fine royal sense of the one appreciated the sound literary sense of the other. In 1683, Boileau, then forty-seven years old, did not belong to the Academy; he was paying the penalty of his early Satires. Louis XIV was out of patience with the delay. A vacancy occurred. La Fontaine, competing for it with Boileau, being accepted on the first ballot and proposed to the king as *subject*, or member (this

was then the custom), an adjournment was had to receive the decision of the monarch, after which the second balloting of the Academy would take place. In the interval, another vacancy occurred; the Academy named Despréaux and presented his name to the king, who said immediately that "the choice was very agreeable to him and would be universally approved." "You can," he added, "receive La Fontaine at once; he has promised to conduct himself properly." But during the six months that had elapsed between the two elections, the king (remarks d'Olivet) scarcely allowed his own inclination to be seen, "because he had made a rule to himself not to influence the suffrages of the Academy." We have since known kings who were less delicate in that matter than Louis XIV.

Let us recognise and hail in these days the strong and noble harmony of the great century. Without Boileau, and without Louis XIV, who regarded Boileau as his Controller-General of Parnassus, what would have happened? Would the great talents themselves have fully rendered all that now forms their most solid heritage of glory? Racine, I fear, would have made another Bérénice; La Fontaine fewer Fables and more *Contes*; Molière himself might have stayed longer with his Scapins and might never have risen to the stern heights of the *Misanthrope*. In a word, each of those great geniuses would have yielded more to his defects. Boileau, that is to say, the good

sense of the critic-poet, authorised and backed by that of the great king, restrained them all, and compelled them, by his respected presence, to do their best and gravest works. Know you what it is that, in our day, is lacking to our poets, so full at their start of natural faculties and happy inspirations and promises? They lack a Boileau and an enlightened monarch; the one supporting and sanctioning the other. Thus our men of talent, feeling themselves in a period of anarchy and want of discipline, quickly follow suit; they behave, strictly speaking, not like noble geniuses, or like men, but like schoolboys in the holidays. We see the result.

Boileau, growing old and morose, believed that sound taste was already compromised, and declared, to whoso would hear him, that French poesy was decadent. When he died, March 13, 1711, he had long despaired of his contemporaries and of his successors. Was it a mere illusion of old age? Imagine Boileau returning to the world in the middle or towards the end of the eighteenth century, and ask yourself what he would have thought of the poesy of that time. Place him, in idea, under the Empire, and ask yourself the same question. It has always seemed to me that those who were most ardent in invoking the authority of Boileau were not those whom he would most surely have recognised as his own. The man who best felt and commented on Boileau, the poet, in the eighteenth century, was Le Brun, the friend of

André Chénier, accused of too much audacity by prosaic rhymesters. Boileau was more daring and more novel than most people, even Andrieux, thought.

Let us leave suppositions that have no precise end and no solution possible. Let us take literary things, such as they come to us to-day, in their confusion and piecemeal condition; isolated and weakened as we are, let us accept them with all their burdens, all their faults, including our own faults also, and our errors in the past. But, things being as they are, let those who feel within them some share of the courage and good sense of Boileau and the men of his race not fail nor weaken. There is a race of men who, when they discover beside them a vice, a folly, literary or moral, keep it secret, and think only of making use of it, and of quietly profiting through life by self-interested flattery or alliances; these are the greater number. But there is yet another race who, seeing the false and accepted hypocrisy, have no peace until, under one form or another, truth as they feel it is brought out and proffered. Be it a question of rhymes only, or of things more serious, let us belong to that race.

X.

Racine.

X.

Racine.

THE great poets, the poets of genius, independently of their class, and without regard to their nature, lyric, epic, or dramatic, may be divided into two glorious families which, for many centuries, have alternately intermingled and dethroned one another, contending for pre-eminence in fame: between them, according to periods, the admiration of men has been unequally awarded. The primitive poets, the founders, the unmixed originals, born of themselves and sons of their own works,—Homer, Pindar, Æschylus, Dante, and Shakespeare,—are sometimes neglected, often preferred, but are always contrary to the studious, polished, docile geniuses of the middle epochs, essentially capable of being educated and perfected. Horace, Virgil, and Tasso are the most brilliant heads of this secondary family, reputed, and with reason, inferior to its elder, but, as a usual thing, better understood by all, more accessible, more cherished. In France, Corneille and Molière are detached from it on more sides than one; Boileau and Racine

belong to it wholly and adorn it, especially Racine, the most accomplished of the class, the most venerated of our poets.

It is the peculiar property of writers of this secondary order to win for themselves almost a unanimity of suffrages, while their illustrious opponents, higher than they in merit, above them in fame and glory, are, nevertheless, brought into question in each new epoch by a certain class of critics. This difference in renown is a necessary consequence of the difference of talents. The ones truly predestined and divine are born with their lot; they are not concerned to enlarge it inch by inch in this life; they dispense profusely, and as if by both hands; for their inward treasury is inexhaustible. Without disquieting themselves, without rendering to their own minds a close account of their means of doing, they *do*. * Their thoughts are not turned inward; their heads are not turned back to measure the way by which they came and calculate how much still lies before them; but they make long marches, never wearying, and never content with what they do. Secret things take place within them—in the breast of their genius—and sometimes transform it. They undergo these changes without taking part in them, without aiding them artificially, any more than man can hasten the time when his hair whitens, the birds the time when their plumage moults, or trees the change of colour in their leafage at the divers seasons. And, proceeding thus, by some great



RACINE.

From a steel engraving.

inward law, some premature, potent principle, they come at last to leave the traces of their force in sublime monumental works; works of a real and stable order beneath an apparent irregularity, as in Nature, intersected with gullies, bristling with crags, hollowed into depths—thus is it with those of one glorious family.

The others need to be born under propitious circumstances, to be cultivated by education, and to ripen in the sun. They develop slowly, knowingly, fertilising themselves by study, and give birth themselves to art. They rise by degrees; follow each step of the way, and never spring to their goal at a bound; their genius enlarges with time, and erects itself by degrees, like a palace to which each year a course is added; they have long hours of reflection and of silence, during which they pause to revise their plan and deliberate; so the edifice, if it is ever completed, is a noble, learned, lucid, admirable conception, of a harmony that charms the eye, and perfect in execution. To understand it, the mind of the spectator discovers without difficulty, and mounts with a sort of placid pride the ladder of ideas up which has gone the genius of the architect.

Now, according to a very shrewd and very just remark of Père Tournemine, we admire in an author only those qualities of which we have the root and the germ within us. Hence it follows that, in the works of the great, superior souls, there is a relative

level to which each inward spirit can rise, but cannot go beyond; a spot whence it must judge of the great whole as it can. This is somewhat as it is with the families of plants living at different elevations on the Cordilleras; each unable to pass above a given height; or rather as it is with families of birds whose soaring in the air is fixed at a certain limit.

Now if, at the relative height to which each class of minds can rise in understanding a poem, no corresponding quality is found to act as a stepping-stone, a platform, from which to contemplate the country round, if there are jagged peaks, a torrent, a gulf, what happens? Minds that have found no rest for their feet will return, like the dove to the ark, without so much as an olive twig:—I am at Versailles, on the garden side; I mount the grand stairway; breath fails me half-way up, and I stop; but at last I see before me the lines of the château, its wings; I appreciate their symmetry; whereas if I climb, from the banks of the Rhine, some winding path that leads to a Gothic dungeon, and stop short, breathless, half-way up, it may be that a rise of ground, a tree, a bush will hide the whole view from me. That is a true image of the two poesies.

Racinian poesy is so constructed that at every height are stepping-stones, and places of support for weaklings. Shakespeare's work is rougher of approach; the eye cannot take it in on all sides; I know very worthy persons who toil and sweat to climb it, and

after striking against crag or bush, come back swearing in good faith that there was nothing higher up; but, no sooner are they down upon the plain than that cursed enchantment tower appears to them once more in the distance, a thousand times more imperatively than those of Montlhéry to Boileau. But let us leave Shakespeare and such comparisons and try to mount, after many worshippers, a few of the steps, slippery from long usage, that lead to Racine's marble temple.

Born at La Ferté-Milon in 1639, Racine was orphaned at a very tender age. His mother, daughter of a king's attorney at Villers-Cotterets, and his father, controller of the salt stores at Ferté-Milon, died very nearly together. At four years of age he was confided to the care of his maternal grandfather, who put him, while still very young, to school in Beauvais. After the old man's death, he was taken to Port-Royal-des-Champs, where his grandmother and one of his aunts had retired. It is from there that the first interesting details of his childhood have been transmitted to us. The illustrious recluse, Antoine Le Maître, felt a special regard for him, as we see by a letter that he wrote him during one of the persecutions, in which letter he urged him to be docile, and to take good care, during his absence, of his eleven volumes of Saint Chrysostom.

The "little Racine" soon learned to read the Greek authors in the original; he made extracts and annotations in his own writing, and learned them by heart;

first, Plutarch, then the "Banquet" of Plato, with Saint Basil and Pindar in turn, and in his idle hours "Theagenes and Chariclea." Already he revealed his reserved, innocent, and dreamy nature by lonely walks, book in hand (which he did not always read), through those beautiful solitudes of which he felt the sweetness even to tears. His dawning talent was exercised at that time in translating the touching hymns of the Breviary into French verse, which he afterwards retouched; but above all, he delighted in celebrating in verse Port-Royal, the landscape, the ponds, the gardens, and the meadows. These youthful productions show true sentiment beneath extreme inexperience and weakness of expression and colour; with a little attention we can distinguish in certain places a far-off echo, a prelude, as it were, to the melodious choruses of *Esther*.

He left Port-Royal after three years' stay, and came to do his course in logic at the college of Harcourt in Paris. The pious and stern impressions he had received from his first masters weakened by degrees in the new world by which he was carried along. His intimacies with amiable and dissipated young men, with the Abbé Le Vasseur and La Fontaine, whom he knew from that time, gave him more and more a taste for poesy, romances, and the theatre. He wrote gallant sonnets, concealed from Port-Royal and the Jansenists, who were writing him, meanwhile, letters upon letters with threats of anathema. We find him,

in 1660, in communication with the actors of the Marais about a play the name of which has not come down to us. His ode on the *Nymphes de la Seine*, written for the marriage of the king, was sent to Chapelain, who "received it with all the kindness in the world, and, ill as he was, kept it three days to make remarks upon it in writing." The most important of these remarks related to the Tritons, who never lived in rivers, only in the sea. This poem won for Racine the protection of Chapelain, and a gift in money from Colbert.

His cousin, Vitart, intendant of the Château of Chevreuse, sent him to that castle on one occasion to take his place in superintending masons, glaziers, and other workmen. The poet was already so used to the bustle of Paris that he considered Chevreuse a place of exile, and dated his letters "from Babylon." He relates that he goes to the wine-shop two or three times a day, paying the score of every one, and that a lady has taken him for a sergeant; then he adds: "I read poesy, I try to make it; I read the adventures of Ariosto, and I am not without adventures of my own."

All his friends at Port-Royal, his aunt, his masters, seeing him thus on the high-road to perdition, consulted together to get him out of it. They represented to him vehemently the necessity of a profession, and they induced him to go to Uzès in Languedoc, to stay with a maternal uncle, a canon of Saint-

Geneviève, with hope of a benefice. We find him at Uzès during the winter of 1661 and the spring and summer of 1662, clothed in black from head to foot, reading Saint Thomas Aquinas to please the good canon, and Ariosto and Euripides to comfort himself; much caressed by all the teachers and all the priests of the neighbourhood on account of his uncle, and consulted by all the poets and all the lovers of the regions roundabout concerning their verses, on account of his little Parisian reputation and his celebrated ode on "Peace": for the rest, going out but little, wearying of a dull town, all the inhabitants of which seemed to him hard and selfish; comparing himself to Ovid on the shores of the Euxine, and fearing nothing so much as to corrupt, through listening to the *patois* of the South, the excellent, true French, that pure flour of wheat on which men are nourished around Château-Thierry, Ferté-Milon, and Reims.

Nature herself was only moderately attractive to him. "If the country had a little delicacy, if the rocks were a little less frequent, I might take it for the land of Cythera." But the rocks oppress him, the heat chokes him, the grasshoppers are louder than the nightingales. He thinks the passions of the South violent and carried to excess; as for him, sensible and moderate, he lives in silence and reflection; he keeps his room and reads much, and does not even feel the need of composing. His letters to the Abbé Le Vasseur are cold, refined, correct, flowery, mythological,

and slightly satirical; the sentimental *bel esprit* that is to blossom out in *Bérénice* is perceptible throughout; there are numerous Italian quotations and gallant allusions; but no indecency such as young men allow to escape them, not a single ignoble detail; all is exquisitely elegant in its closest familiarity. The women of the region dazzled him at first, and a few days after his arrival he wrote to La Fontaine the following remarks, which give food for thought:

“ All the women are brilliant, and they dress themselves in the most natural way in the world; as for their persons, *color verus, corpus solidum et succi plenum*; but as the first thing that was said to me was to be on my guard, I do not wish to say more about them. Besides, it would be profaning the house of a beneficed priest, in which I live, to make a long discourse on the matter: *Domus mea, domus orationis*. That is why you must expect I shall say no more to you on this subject. I was told: ‘ Be blind.’ If I can’t be that entirely, I can at least be mute; for, don’t you see? one must be monk with monks, just as I was wolf with you and the other wolves of your pack.”

But his naturally chaste and reserved habits prevailed when he was not led away by companions in pleasure. A few months later he answers very seriously a jesting insinuation of the Abbé Le Vasseur, that, God be thanked! his liberty was still safe, and that when he left that region he should bring back his heart as sound and whole as he brought it; and thereupon he relates a recent danger which his weakness had happily escaped. The passage is little known, and it casts enough light into Racine’s soul to make it worth quoting at length:

"There is a young lady here very well made, with a fine figure. I had never seen her nearer than five or six feet, and I thought her very handsome; her skin seemed to me bright and dazzling; her eyes large, of a fine black, her throat, and the rest that is uncovered rather freely in this region, very white. I had always had a somewhat tender idea of her, approaching to an inclination; but I saw her only in church, for, as I have told you, I am rather solitary, more so than my cousin advised. At last I wished to see whether or not I was mistaken in the idea I had of her, and I found a very civil occasion; I approached her and spoke to her.

"What I am telling you happened not quite a month ago, and I had no other intention than to see what sort of answer she would make to me. I spoke to her with indifference, but as soon as I opened my mouth and looked at her I became confused. I saw upon her face certain blotches, as if she was just getting well of an illness, and that made me change my ideas. Nevertheless, I remained there, and she answered me with a very gentle and very obliging air; and, to tell you the truth, I must have taken her on some bad day, for she is thought very handsome in the town; and I know several young men who sigh for her from the depths of their heart. She is even thought one of the most virtuous and gayest in the town. But I am very glad of this encounter, which has served to deliver me from a certain beginning of agitation; for I am studying now to live rather more reasonably, and not let myself be carried away by all sorts of objects. I begin my novitiate. . . ."

Racine was then twenty-three years old. The *naïveté* of his impressions and childlike heart that appears in the above narration marks a point of departure, whence he advanced gradually, by dint of experience and study, until he reached the utmost profundity of the same passion in *Phèdre*. His novitiate, however, was never completed. He grew weary of awaiting a benefice that was always promised but never came; so, leaving the canon and the promises, he returned to Paris, where his ode

on *La Renommée aux Muses* won him another gift of money, an entrance at Court, and the acquaintance of Boileau and Molière. The *Thébaïde* followed rapidly.

Until then, Racine had found on his path none but protectors and friends. But his first dramatic success awakened envy, and from that moment his career was full of perplexities and vexations which his irritable susceptibility more than once embittered. The tragedy of *Alexandre* estranged him from Molière and Corneille; from Molière, because he withdrew the play from him and gave it to the actors of the Hôtel de Bourgogne; with Corneille, because the illustrious old man declared to the young man, after listening to the reading of the piece, that it showed great talent for poesy in general, but not for the stage. When it was performed, the partisans of Corneille endeavoured to hinder its success. Some said that Taxile was not an honourable man; others that he did not deserve his fate; some that Alexandre was not lover-like enough; others that he never came upon the scene except to talk of love. When *Andromaque* appeared, Pyrrhus was reproached for a lingering of ferocity; they wanted him more polished, more gallant, more uniform in character. This was a consequence of Corneille's system, which made all his personages of one piece, wholly good or wholly bad from head to foot; to which Racine replied, with good judgment:

“Aristotle, far from asking us for perfect heroes, wishes, on the contrary, that the tragic personages, that is to say, those whose misfortune makes the catastrophe of the tragedy, shall be neither very good nor very bad. He does not wish them to be extremely good, because the punishment of a good man would excite more indignation than pity in the spectators; nor that they be bad to excess, because no one can feel pity for a scoundrel. They should therefore have a mediocre goodness, that is to say, a virtue capable of weakness, so that they fall into misfortune through some fault that causes them to be pitied and not detested.”

I dwell on this point, because the great innovation of Racine, and his incontestable dramatic originality, consist precisely in this reduction of heroic personages to proportions more human, more natural, and in a delicate analysis of the secret shades of sentiment and passion. That which, above all, distinguishes Racine, in the composition of style as in that of the drama, is logical sequence, the uninterrupted connection of ideas and sentiments; in him all is filled up, leaving no void, argued without reply; never is there any chance to be surprised by those abrupt changes, those sudden *volte-faces* of which Corneille made frequent abuse in the play of his characters and the progression of his drama.

I am, nevertheless, far from asserting that, even in this, all the advantage of the stage was on the side of Racine; but when he appeared, novelty was in his favour, a novelty admirably adapted to the taste of a Court in which were many weaknesses, where nothing shone that had not its shadow, and the amorous chronicle of which, opened by a La Vallière, was

to end in a Maintenon. It will always remain a question whether Racine's observing, inquiring method, employed to the exclusion of every other, is dramatic in the absolute sense of the word; for my part, I think it is not; but it satisfied, we must allow, the society of those days which, in its polished idleness, did not demand a drama more agitating, more tempestuous, more "transporting"—to use Mme. de Sévigné's language; a society which willingly accepted *Bérénice*, while awaiting *Phèdre*, the masterpiece of Racine's manner.

—*Bérénice* was written by command of Madame [Henriette], Duchesse d'Orléans, who encouraged all the new poets, and who, on this occasion, did Corneille the ill-turn of bringing him into the lists in contest with his young rival. On the other hand, Boileau, a sincere and faithful friend, defended Racine against the clamouring mob of writers, upheld him in his momentary discouragements, and excited him by wise severity to a progress without intermission. This daily supervision of Boileau would assuredly have been fatal to an author of freer genius, of impetuous warmth or careless grace, like Molière, like La Fontaine, for instance; it could not be otherwise than profitable to Racine, who, before he knew Boileau, was already following (save for a few Italian whimsicalities) that path of correctness and sustained elegance in which the latter maintained and confirmed him. I think, therefore, that Boileau was right when

he applauded himself for having taught Racine "to write with difficulty easy verses"; but he went too far if he gave him, as it was asserted that he did, "the precept of writing the second line before the first."

After *Andromaque*, which appeared in 1667, ten years elapsed before *Phèdre*, the triumph of which came in 1677. We know how Racine filled those years. Animated by youth and the love of glory, spurred by his admirers as well as by his rivals and detractors, he gave himself up wholly to the development of his genius. He broke completely with Port-Royal; and à propos of an attack by Nicole on writers for the stage, he flung out a piquant letter, which caused scandal and drew down upon him reprisals. By dint of waiting and soliciting he had at last obtained a benefice, and the licence for the first edition of *Andromaque* was granted to the Sieur Racine, prior of Épinai. A monk disputed his right to that priory; a lawsuit followed, which no one understood; and Racine, weary of the whole business, desisted, avenging himself on the judges by *Les Plaideurs*, a comedy that might have been written by Molière; an admirable farce, the handling of which reveals a hitherto-unperceived side of the poet, and reminds us that he read Rabelais, Marot, even Scarron, and had his place in the wine-shop between Chappelle and La Fontaine.

This busy life, with its solid studies, to which were

added literary quarrels, visits to Court, the Academy after 1673, and perhaps, as some have suspected, certain tender weaknesses at the theatre—this confusion of vexations, pleasures, and fame, brought Racine to the year 1677, when he was thirty-eight years old, at which period he broke away from it to marry and be converted in a Christian manner.

His last two plays, *Iphigénie* and *Phèdre*, had roused a fresh storm against their author; all the hissed authors, the Jansenist pamphleteers, the superannuated great seigneurs, and the last remains of the *précieuses*, Boyer, Leclerc, Coras, Perrin, Pradon, I was about to say Fontenelle, Barbier-d'Aucour, and above all (in the present case), the Duc de Nevers, Mme. Des Houlières, and the hôtel de Bouillon, rose up in arms shamelessly, and the unworthy manœuvres of that cabal must have troubled the poet not a little; but, for all that, his plays had triumphed; the public went to them and applauded them in tears. Boileau, who never flattered, even in friendship, issued a magnificent letter to the conquering author, "blessing" him, and declaring the century that saw the "birth of his stately marvels fortunate." This was, therefore, less than ever the moment for Racine to quit the scene that resounded with his name; he had far more ground for intoxication than for literary disappointment; consequently, his resolution was absolutely free from the sulky ill-humour to which some have endeavoured to attribute it.

For some time past, since the first fire of youth, the first fervours of mind and senses were spent, the memory of his childhood, of his masters, of his aunt, the nun at Port-Royal, had again laid hold upon Racine's heart; and the involuntary comparison forced upon him between his peaceful satisfaction in other days, and his present fame, so troubled and embittered, brought him to regret a life that once was regular. This secret feeling, working within him, can be seen in the preface to *Phèdre*, and must have sustained him, more than we know, in the profound analysis he makes in that play of the "virtuous sorrow" of a soul that sees evil and yet pursues it. His own heart explained to him that of *Phèdre*; and if we suppose, what is very probable, that he was detained in spite of himself at the theatre by some amorous attachment he could not shake off, the resemblance becomes closer, and helps us to understand all that he has put into *Phèdre* of anguish actually felt, and more personal than usual in the struggles of passion.

However that may be, the moral aim of *Phèdre* is beyond a doubt; the great Arnauld himself could not refrain from recognising it, and thus almost verifying the words of the author, who "hoped, by means of this play to reconcile a quantity of celebrated persons to tragedy, through their pity and their doctrine." Nevertheless, going deeper still in his reflections on reform, Racine judged it more prudent and more consistent to quit the theatre, and he did so with courage,

but without too much effort. He married, reconciled himself with Port-Royal, prepared himself in domestic life for the duties of a father, and when Louis XIV appointed him, at the same time as Boileau, historiographer, he neglected none of his new duties: with these in view, he began by making excerpts from the treatise of Lucian on "The Manner of Writing History," and he applied himself to the reading of Mézeray, Vittorio Siri, and others.

From the little that we have now read of the character, the morals, and the habits of mind of Racine, it is easy to foretell the essential fine qualities and defects of his work, to perceive to what he might have attained and, at the same time, in what he was likely to be lacking. Great art in constructing a plot; exact calculation in its arrangement; slow and successive development rather than force of conception, simple and fertile; which acts simultaneously as if by process of crystallisation around several centres in brains that are naturally dramatic; presence of mind in the smallest details; remarkable skill in winding only one thread at a time; skill also in pruning and cutting down rather than power to be concise; ingenious knowledge of how to introduce and how to dismiss his personages; sometimes a crucial situation eluded, either by a magniloquent speech or by the necessary absence of an embarrassing witness; in the characters nothing divergent or eccentric; all inconvenient accessory parts and antecedents suppressed; nothing,

however, too bare or too monotonous, but only two or three harmonising tints on a simple background; then, in the midst of all this, passion that we have not seen born, the flood of which comes swelling on, softly foaming, and bearing you away, as it were, upon the whitened current of a beauteous river: that is Racine's drama. And if we come down to his style and to the harmony of his versification, we shall follow beauties of the same order, restrained within the same limits; variations of melodious tones, no doubt, but all within the scale of a single octave.

A few remarks on *Britannicus* will state my thought precisely, and justify it, if, given in such general terms, it may seem bold. The topic of the drama is Nero's crime, the one by which he first escapes the authority of his mother and his governors. In Tacitus, Britannicus is shown to be a young lad fourteen or fifteen years of age, gentle, intelligent, and sad. One day, in the midst of a feast, Nero, who is drunk, compels him to sing in order to make him ridiculous. Britannicus sings a song in which he makes allusion to his own precarious fate, and to the patrimony of which he has been defrauded; instead of laughing and ridiculing him, the guests, much affected and less dissimulating than usual because they were drunk, compassionated him loudly. As for Nero, though still pure of shedding blood, his natural ferocity has long been muttering in his soul and watching for an occasion to break loose. He tries slow poison on

Britannicus. Debauchery gets the better of him; he neglects his wife Octavia for the courtesan Actea. Seneca lends his ministry to this shameful intrigue. Agrippina is at first shocked, but she ends by embracing her son and lending him her house for the rendezvous. Agrippina, mother, granddaughter, sister, niece, and widow of emperors, a murderess, incestuous, and a prostitute, has no other fear than to see her son escape her with the imperial power.

Such is the mental situation of the personages at the moment when Racine begins his play. What does he do? He quotes in his preface the savage words of Tacitus on Agrippina: *Quæ, cunctis malæ dominationis cupidinibus flagrans, habebat in partibus Pallantem*, and adds: "I merely quote this one sentence on Agrippina, for there are too many things to say of her. It is she whom I have taken the most pains to express properly, and my tragedy is not less the downfall of Agrippina than the death of Britannicus." But in spite of this stated intention of the author, the character of Agrippina is inadequately expressed; as an interest had to be created in her downfall, her most odious vices are thrown into the shade; she becomes a personage of little real presence, vague, unexplained, a sort of tender and jealous mother; there is no question of her adulteries and her murders beyond an allusion for the benefit of those who have read her history in Tacitus. In place of Actea we have the romantic Junia. Nero in love is nothing

more than the impassioned rival of Britannicus, and the hideous aspects of the tiger disappear, or are delicately touched when they must be encountered. What shall be said of the *dénouement*? of Junia taking refuge with the Vestals, and placed under the protection of the people?—as if the people protected any one under Nero! But what, above all, we have a right to blame in Racine, is the suppression of the scene at the feast. Britannicus is seated at the table; wine is poured out for him; one of his servants tastes the beverage, according to the custom of the day, so necessary was it to guard against crime. But Nero has foreseen all; the wine is too hot, cold water must be added, and it is that cold water which must be poisoned. The effect is sudden; the poison kills at once; Locuste was charged to prepare it under pain of death. Whether it were disdain for these circumstances, or the difficulty of expressing them in verse, Racine evades them; he confines himself to presenting the moral effect of the poisoning on the spectators, and in that he succeeds. But it must be owned that even on that point he falls below the incisive brevity, the splendid conciseness of Tacitus. Too often, when he translates Tacitus, as he translated the Bible, Racine opens a path for himself between the extreme qualities of the originals and carefully keeps to the middle of the road, never approaching the sides where the precipice lies.

Britannicus, *Phèdre*, *Athalie*, Roman, Greek, and Biblical tragedy, those are the three great dramatic

claims of Racine, below which all his other masterpieces range themselves. I have already expressed my admiration for *Phèdre*, and yet one cannot conceal from one's self that the play is even less Greek in manners and morals than *Britannicus* is Roman. Hippolytus, the lover, resembles Hippolytus, the hunter, the favourite of Diana, even less than Nero, the lover, resembles the Nero of Tacitus. *Phèdre*, queen-mother and regent for her son, on the supposed death of her husband amply counterbalances Junia, protected by the people and consigned to the Vestals. Euripides himself leaves much to be desired as to truth; he has lost the higher meaning of the mythological traditions that Æschylus and Sophocles entered into so deeply; but in him we find, at any rate, a whole order of things—landscape, religion, rites, family recollections, all these constitute a depth of reality which fixes the mind and rests it. With Racine all that is not *Phèdre* and her passion escapes and disappears. The sad Aricia, the Pallantides, the divers adventures of Theseus, leave scarcely a trace in our memory.

This might lead us to conclude with Corneille, if we dared, that Racine had a far greater talent for poesy in general than for the drama in particular. Racine was dramatic, no doubt, but he was so in a style that was little so. In other times, in times like ours, when the proportions of the drama are necessarily so different from what they were then, what would he have

done? Would he have attempted it? His genius, naturally meditative and placid, would it have sufficed for that intensity of action that our *blasée* curiosity demands? for that absolute truth in ethics and characters that becomes indispensable after a period of mighty revolution? for that higher philosophy that gives to all things a meaning, that makes action something else than mere imbroglio, and historical colour something better than white-wash? Had he the force and the character to lead all these parts of the work abreast; to maintain them in presence and in harmony, to blend, to link them into an indissoluble and living form, to fuse them one into the other in the fire of passion? Would he not have found it more simple, more conformable to his nature, to withdraw passion from the midst of these intricacies in which it might be lost as if poured into sand? to keep it within his own channel and follow singly the harmonious course of grand and noble elegy, of which *Esther* and *Bérénice* are the limpid and transparent reservoirs? Those are delicate questions, to which we can only reply by conjectures. I have hazarded mine, in which there is nothing irreverent towards the genius of Racine. Is it irreverent to declare that we prefer in him pure poesy to drama, and that we are tempted to ally him to the race of lyric geniuses, of religious and elegiac singers, whose mission here below is to celebrate Love—love as Dante and Plato saw it?

The life of retirement, of household cares, and study, which Racine led during the twelve years of his fullest maturity, seem to confirm these conjectures. Corneille also tried for some years to renounce the theatre; but, though already in declining years, he could not continue the attempt and soon returned to the arena. Nothing of this impatience or this difficulty of controlling himself appears to have troubled the long silence of Racine. His affections went elsewhere; he thought of Port-Royal, then so persecuted, and took delightful pleasure in memories of his childhood:

“There was no religious house at that time,” he says, “in better odour than Port-Royal. All that could be seen of it from without inspired piety; people admired the grave and touching manner in which the praises of God were sung there, the simplicity, and at the same time the propriety of their church, the modesty of the servants, the solitude of the parlour, the little eagerness shown by the nuns to enter into conversation, their lack of curiosity about the things of the world, and even about the affairs of their neighbours; in a word, an entire indifference to all that did not concern God. But how much more did persons who knew the interior of the monastery find subjects of edification! What peace! what silence! what charity! what love for poverty and for deprivation! Toil without intermission, continual prayer, no ambition except for the lowest and humblest employments; no impatience in the sisters; no whims in the mothers; obedience always prompt, and commands always reasonable.”

Port-Royal had all of Racine's soul; thence he drew calmness; in behalf of it he offered prayers; he was filled with the moanings of that afflicted house when for the prosperous house of Saint-Cyr he wrote the touching melodies of the chorus of *Esther*. During

these years of his retirement he wrote the History of Port-Royal, as well as that of the king's campaigns, delivered two or three discourses before the Academy, and translated certain hymns of the Church. Mme. de Maintenon drew him from his literary inaction, about the year 1688, by asking him for a play for Saint-Cyr. He woke with a start, at forty-eight years of age, to a new and wonderful career, taken in two steps: *Esther* for his first attempt, *Athalie* for his masterpiece. Those two works, so sudden, so unexpected, so different to the others, do they not confute our opinion of Racine, and escape all the general criticisms I have ventured to make upon his work?

Racine on Hebrew subjects is far otherwise at ease than on Greek and Roman subjects. Nurtured from childhood on sacred books, sharing the beliefs of the people of God, he keeps strictly to the Scripture narrative; he does not think himself obliged to mingle the authority of Aristotle in the action of the play, nor, above all, to place at the heart of his drama an amorous intrigue (and love is of all human things the one which, resting on an eternal basis, varies most in its forms according to the ages, and consequently leads the poet more surely into error). Nevertheless, in spite of the relationship of religions, and the communion of certain beliefs, there is in Judaism an element apart, inward, primitive, oriental, which it is important to grasp and put forward prominently, under pain of being tame and unfaithful; and this

fundamental element, so well understood by Bossuet in his *Politique Sacrée*, by M. de Maistre in all his writings, and by the English painter, Martin, in his art, was not accessible to the sweet and tender poet who saw the Old Testament solely through the New, and had no other guide to Samuel than Saint Paul.

Let us begin with the architecture of *Athalie*; with the Hebrews all was figurative, symbolical; the importance of forms was part of the spirit of the law. Vainly do I look in Racine for that temple wondrously built by Solomon, in marble, in cedar, overlaid with pure gold, the walls gleaming with golden cherubim and palm-trees. I am in the vestibule, but I see not the two famous columns of bronze, eighteen cubits high, one named Jachin, the other Boaz; nor the sea of brass, nor the brazen oxen, nor the lions; neither can I imagine within the tabernacle the cherubim of olive-wood, ten cubits high, their wings stretched out and touching one another until they encircled the arch of the dome. The scene in Racine takes place under a Greek peristyle, rather bare, and I am much less disposed to accept the "sacrifice of blood" and "immolation by the sacred knife" than if the poet had taken me to the colossal temple, where King Solomon offered unto Jehovah, for a peace-offering, two-and-twenty thousand oxen and one hundred and twenty thousand sheep. Analogous criticism may be made upon the characters and speeches of the personages.

In short, *Athalie* is an imposing work as a whole, and in many parts magnificent, but not so complete nor so unapproachable as many have chosen to consider it. In it Racine does not penetrate into the very essence of Hebraic oriental poesy; he steps cautiously between its naïve sublimity on the one hand, and its naïve grace on the other, carefully denying himself both.

Shall I own it? *Esther*, with its charming gentleness and its lovely pictures, less dramatic than *Athalie*, and with lower aims, seems to me more complete in itself and leaving nothing to be desired. It is true that this graceful Bible episode is flanked by two strange events, about which Racine says not a single word: I mean the sumptuous feast of Ahasuerus, that lasted one hundred and eighty days, and the massacre of their enemies by the Jews, that lasted two whole days, at the formal request of the Jewess Esther. With that exception, and perhaps by reason of that omission, this delightful poem, so perfect as a whole, so filled with chastity, with sighs, with religious unction, seems to me the most natural fruit that Racine's genius has borne. It is the purest effusion, the most winning plaint of his tender soul, which could not be present where a nun took the veil without being melted to tears—an incident of which Mme. de Maintenon wrote: "Racine, who likes to weep, is coming to the profession of Sister Lalie."

About this time, he composed for Saint-Cyr four

spiritual canticles, which should be numbered among his finest works. Two are after Saint Paul, whom Racine treats as he has already treated Tacitus and the Bible; that is to say, by encircling him with suavity and harmony, but sometimes enfeebling him. It is to be regretted that he did not carry this species of religious composition farther, and that in the eight years that followed *Athalie* he did not cast forth with originality some of the personal, tender, passionate, fervent sentiments that lay hidden in his breast. Certain passages in his letters to his eldest son, then attached to the embassy in Holland, make us conscious of an inward and deep-lying poesy which he has nowhere communicated, which he restrained within himself for long years; inward delights incessantly ready to overflow, but which he never poured out except in prayer at the feet of God, and with tears that filled his eyes.

The poesy of those days, which formed a part of *literature*, was so distinct from *life*, that the idea of ever joining them came to no one; and once devoted to domestic cares, to fatherly affection, and the duties of a parishioner, a man had raised an insurmountable wall between the Muses and himself. Nevertheless, as no deep sentiment is ever sterile within us, this poesy, repressed and without issue, becomes a sweet savour, secret, yet mingling in every action, in the lightest words, exhaling itself by ways unknown, and communicating a good fragrance of worth and virtue.

This was the case with Racine; it is the effect made upon us to-day as we read his letters to his son, already a man launched upon the world; simple, paternal letters, written by the family hearth, beside the mother, and among the six other children; every line with the impress of grave tenderness, austere sweetness; letters in which reproofs as to style, advice to avoid the "repetition of words," and the "locutions of the 'Gazette of Holland,'" are naïvely mingled with precepts for conduct and Christian warnings:

"You have some reason to attribute the success of your voyage in such bad weather to the prayers that have been offered for you. I count mine as nothing; but your mother and your little sister prayed God every day to preserve you from accidents; and they did the same at Port-Royal. . . . M. de Torcy informs me that you are in the *Gazette de Hollande*; had I known it, I should have bought the paper to read it to your little sisters, who would think you had become a man of consequence."

He writes that Mme. Racine is always thinking of her eldest son, and that when they have anything "a little good for dinner" she cannot keep from saying: "Racine would have liked to eat that." A friend, returning from Holland, brought news to the family of the cherished son; they overwhelmed him with questions, and his answers were all satisfactory: "But I did not dare," writes the excellent father, "to ask him if you thought a little of the good God; I was so afraid the answer might not be such as I could wish."

The most important domestic event of Racine's last

years was the taking of the veil at Melun of his youngest daughter, then eighteen years of age. He tells his son of the ceremony and relates the details to his old aunt, still living at Port-Royal, of which she was abbess. He never ceased to sob during the service; from that breaking heart, treasures of love, inexpressible emotions flowed forth in those tears; it was like the oil poured out from Mary's vase. Fénelon wrote to him to console him. With this extreme giving way to emotion, this keen sensibility, growing more sensitive daily, we can understand the fatal effect on Racine of Louis XIV's speech, and of that last blow which killed him. But he was already, and had been for a long time ill—ill of the ill of poesy; towards the end, this inward and hidden predisposition degenerated into a sort of dropsy, which delivered him over without strength or resource to the slightest shock.

—He died in 1699 in his sixtieth year, revered and mourned by all, crowned by fame, but leaving, it must be said, a literary posterity that was not virile, well-intentioned rather than capable: such as Rollin and Olivet in criticism, Duché and Campistron in drama, Jean Baptiste and the Racine sons in ode and poem. From his own time until ours, and through all variations of taste, Racine's renown continues, without attack and constantly receiving universal homage, fundamentally just, and deserved as homage, though often unintelligent in its motives. Critics of little compass have abused the right of citing him as a

model; they have too often proposed for imitation his most inferior qualities; but, for whoso comprehends him truly, there is enough, in his work and in his life, to make him for ever admired as a great poet and cherished as a heart-friend.

XI.

Madame de Caylus.

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IT has often happened to me to speak of that happy epoch of our language and taste that, in France, corresponds with the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, when, after the production of our greatest works, and in the close neighbourhood of the best as well as the most charming minds, delicacy and refinement were extreme, and corruption (meaning pretension, affectation) had not yet come. To-day, I desire to show that perfect moment in a pleasing and somewhat distinct person, who paints it for us with vivacity and grace, and who paints nothing else. It would be easy to find greater examples than Mme. de Caylus, who wrote with difficulty, and only accidentally, as it were; but such examples would prove other things, more things than I have in view, and the delicacy of which I wish to give an idea is in them complicated, in a measure, by the talent of the writer. Here, on the contrary, in pausing a moment with this woman of a pen so delicate and light, we are not distracted from the point I am

especially anxious to indicate, a quality which those who knew her best designated, when speaking of her, as "pure urbanity."

Mme. de Caylus was the niece of Mme. de Maintenon, niece in the Bretagne way. The great d'Aubigné of the sixteenth century, the warrior-writer, the Calvinist-frondeur, the bold and caustic companion of Henri IV, had a son and two daughters; Mme. de Maintenon was the daughter of the son; Mme. de Caylus was the granddaughter of one of the daughters. The father of Mme. de Caylus, the Marquis de Villette, a distinguished naval officer who left *Memoirs*, seems to have had something of her grandfather about him in courage and intellect. Mme. de Caylus herself was not without likeness to her great forefather; beneath her womanly grace and her angelic air she has a sharp, keen, biting wit. She is a female Antoine Hamilton. At first she seems occupied solely with pleasures, amusements, and the trifles of society; but do not for a moment suppose that you are dealing with a weak or silly woman. Her mind is clear and firm, observing and sensible; it is, like that of Mme. de Maintenon, solid; but in Mme. de Caylus solidity lies hidden by a flower. Her depth, however, will be found by whoso seeks it; and, after living with her for a short time, we say to ourselves that there is nothing, after all, like a strong race when grace comes in to crown it.

Born in 1673, in Poitou, Mlle. Marguerite de Villette-



MARQUISE DE CAYLUS.
After the painting by G. Staal.

Murçay was carried off from her family, when seven years of age, by Mme. de Maintenon. The king was then converting, *nolentes volentes*, the Huguenots of his kingdom, and Mme. de Maintenon, following his example, made it her duty to convert her own family. So the young de Murçay was carried off while her father was at sea. An aunt, the father's sister, lent a helping hand to this abduction which had so good a purpose. We ought to hear Mme. de Caylus relate this early adventure:

"My mother had hardly started for Niort before my aunt, who was used to changing religion, and had just been converted for the second or third time, started too, and took me with her to Paris."

On the way they encounter other young girls, older in years, whom Mme. de Maintenon was claiming for conversion. These young people, determined to resist, were as much astonished as they were grieved to see the young de Murçay carried off without defence:

"As for me," she says, "content to go wherever they took me, I was neither" (grieved or astonished). . . . "We arrived together in Paris, where Mme. de Maintenon came at once to fetch me, and took me alone to Saint-Germain. At first I wept a great deal; but the next day I thought the King's mass so beautiful that I consented to become a Catholic, on condition that I should hear it every day, and that I should be guaranteed against whipping. That was all the discussion they employed, and the sole abjuration that I made."

From the tone in which Mme. de Caylus relates things held to be so important, we are led to ask what

she really thought of them. Did she know, herself? Like Mme. de Sévigné, her natural wit and liveliness carries her away; the facts seem to her amusing, and she relates them gaily.

Mme. de Maintenon brought her up, and did it as she knew how to do it; that is to say, with taste, with preciseness, and in perfection. All her careless and rather volatile graces, which might otherwise have run the risk of emancipating themselves too early and of playing at large, were regulated and brought to good effect, appearing at the right time. They married her at the age of thirteen, and rather badly. It was one of Mme. de Maintenon's assumed humilities to marry this charming niece, whom the greatest matches were seeking, in a mediocre way. Mme. de Maintenon was full of such refinements of modesty and disinterestedness in view of distinction and glory; in this case the child paid the cost of the aunt's virtue. The husband given to her, M. de Caylus, very ordinary as to fortune, was in other respects most unworthy of her. When he died in Flanders, in 1704, "his death gave pleasure to all his family, he was *blasé*, stupefied for many years with wine and brandy," and they kept him on the frontier in winter as well as summer, expressly forbidding him to approach either his wife or the Court. It was to such a man, with such warnings, that Mme. de Maintenon, from principle, and in preference to all others, thought it right to give a young girl whom she had brought

up with the utmost care, and of whom all eye-witnesses give us enchanting descriptions:

“Never,” cries Saint-Simon, “was there a face so spiritual, so touching, so speaking; never a freshness like hers, never so many graces or more intelligence, never so much gaiety and liveliness, never a creature more bewitching.”

And the Abbé de Choisy, who knew her at that time and later, and who enjoyed her at all ages, says:

“Laughter and playfulness shone in rivalry round her; her mind was still more lovable than her face; one had no time to breathe or be dull when she was near. All the Champmeslés in the world never had those ravishing tones of voice which she gave out in declaiming, and if her natural gaiety had allowed her to check certain little coquettish airs, that all her innocence could not justify, she would have been a perfect person.”

À propos of this comparison with Mlle. Champmeslé, it must be remembered that Mme. de Caylus played Esther at Saint-Cyr, and played the part better, it was said, than the famous actress would have done. She was not educated at Saint-Cyr; she came too soon for that, but she witnessed its beginnings; and one day, when Racine recited to Mme. de Maintenon the scenes in *Esther*, which he was composing for that establishment, Mme. de Caylus began to declaim them so well, and in so touching a voice, that Racine entreated Mme. de Maintenon to let her niece act the part. It was for her that he composed the prologue of *La Piété*, in which she made her first appearance. But Mme. de Caylus, once launched, did not confine herself to the prologue, and she played successively all personages,

but especially Esther. She had but one defect, and that was to act too well and touch the heart too deeply by certain accents. "They continue to play *Esther*," writes Mme. de Sévigné to her daughter (1689). "Mme. de Caylus, who was their Champmeslé, plays no longer; she did too well, she was too touching; they want only pure simplicity for those little innocent souls." Mme. de Caylus is considered to have been the last person, the last *actress*, who preserved the pure declamation of Racine, the degree of cadence and song that suited those melodious verses, written expressly for the voices of a Caylus or a La Vallière.

My readers will now comprehend what I meant when I spoke of the perfection of culture and taste in a young woman who, at the age of fifteen, had seen the birth of *Esther*, breathed its first fragrance, and entered so fully into its spirit that she seemed, by the emotion of her voice, to add something to it.

This emotion, with all that it promised of sentiments just ready to blossom forth, was not confined to the voice of Mme. de Caylus. I am not narrating her life, and she herself in her *Souvenirs* scarcely speaks of what relates to herself. But Saint-Simon informs us about her, as he does about so many others, in a way that leaves nothing to be desired. Through her satirical sallies, her vivacities of heart and mind, and her *liaison* with the Duc de Villeroy, Mme. de Caylus earned an exile from Court when nineteen years of age. She was exiled once, and pos-

sibly twice; at any rate, she was not less than thirteen or fourteen years away from Court, under a species of punishment. She consoled herself at first by living in Paris in the society of persons of intellect; it was there that she knew La Fare, who wrote for her some of his prettiest verses. She took a house and received her friends.

But after a while, whether for *ennui* or caprice, or in remembrance of *Esther*, she began to throw herself on the side of devotion, and a devotion that was not considered the proper thing. She took for her confessor Père de La Tour, a man of much intellect, without compliance, and best known as General of the Congregation of the Oratory. But this priest was suspected of Jansenism, and Mme. de Maintenon, with her strict, plain sense, always looking for whatever brought useful respect, would have preferred to see her niece without a confessor than with one who was looked upon with suspicion at Court. She did so much in the matter that, insensibly, the young widow abandoned her confessor and austerity, and resumed her worldly habits. She reappeared at Versailles, at the king's supper, in February, 1707, "beautiful as an angel." It was more than thirteen years since she had seen the king. But by her wit, her charm, and skill she repaired all, and her long eclipse was as if it had never been. She softened and reconquered her aunt, became once more necessary to her, was soon a part of all intimacies and of all private coteries, and her

apparent favour was complete enough to obtain for her certain malignant satirical couplets, which curious persons may seek in the *Recueil* of Maurepas.

Mme. de Caylus remained at Versailles until the death of Louis XIV; put aside from that time as a person of the "old Court," she returned to live in Paris, in a little house within the gardens of the Luxembourg. There she lived, in semi-retirement from the world, among her friends and the Duc de Villeroy to the end, often having with her her son, the Comte de Caylus, an original and a philosopher, giving suppers to people in society and to learned men, mingling devotion, the ways of the world, liberty of mind, and the graces of society in the charming and rather confused measure of the preceding century. She died in April, 1729, aged fifty-six years.

The portraits that we have of her in her youth answer well to the idea given of her beauty by Saint-Simon, the Abbé de Choisy, and Mme. de Coulanges. Whether in morning robes, Court dress, or winter garments, she appears in each delicate, slender, tall, noble, elegant, and pretty; her tall figure gave her the grand air; her face was a little round, an angel face, in which sweetness was allied to mischief, with dainty lips on which raillery played easily, beautiful eyes whence sparkled charm and intelligence; grace and distinction over all. What more shall I say? Such a face had but to choose, it could be, at will, either Esther or Célimène.

As for direct testimony upon her intellect, we find it in the volume of her Correspondence with Mme. de Maintenon and in her *Souvenirs*. This little book of *Souvenirs*, published in 1770 (forty years after her death), with a preface by Voltaire, seems nothing to us to-day, because all its anecdotes have long passed into circulation, and we know them by heart without remembering from whom we obtained them; but, all the same, it was she who first told them delightfully. The book is in the style of the Memoirs of Queen Marguerite, and of some of the historical writings of Mme. de La Fayette: it is "an afternoon's work." No effort is visible; "she never tries," they said of her. Her pen runs negligently; but those negligences are precisely that which makes the ease and charm of her conversation. Do not ask her for more than a rapid series of portraits and sketches; in those she excels. Her light pen touches everything to the purpose; she takes from each person the dominant feature and seizes all it is essential to show in them. Mme. de Maintenon is there undisguised; with her good qualities but without flattery; we can even trace, here and there, beneath the praises, a tinge of malice. Louis XIV is painted by just and neat strokes which show him without exaggeration, and with all his excellences in every-day life; we feel the *king*, worthy of this great epoch in which men thought and spoke so well. Mme. de Montespan, who had so much piquancy and a unique turn of

humour and satire, imagined that she could govern the king for ever, because she knew herself superior to him in mind. Mme. de Caylus disposes in two words of that pretended superiority, which only existed by chance, as it were:

“ The king did not, perhaps, know how to talk as well as she, though he spoke perfectly well. He thought justly, expressed himself nobly, and his least prepared answers covered in few words all that there was that was best to say according to times and seasons, things and persons. He had, far more than his mistress, the sort of mind that gives advantage over others. Never in haste to speak, he examined, he penetrated their characters and thoughts; but, as he was wise, and knew how the words of kings are weighed, he often kept to himself that which his penetration had discovered. If it was a question of discussing important affairs, the most enlightened and the ablest men were astonished at his knowledge, convinced that he knew more than they, and charmed by the manner in which he expressed it. If he frolicked, if he made jokes, if he deigned to tell a story, it was with infinite grace, and a noble and elegant turn of manner and phrase that I have never known in any one but him.”

That is how Louis XIV spoke and kept his rank as king through that epoch of intellect. Without flattery, and considering only the fulness and correctness of his language in ordinary discourse, he might have been one of the leading Academicians of his kingdom.

The observation of Mme. de Caylus is always direct and prompt; she goes to the bottom of characters without appearing to do so. When it is necessary to picture Mlle. de Fontanges, with her beauty and her peculiar style of romantic silliness, and to make it felt how, even if she had lived, the king could not have loved her long, she says it in two lines:

“We accustom ourselves to beauty, but we never accustom ourselves to silliness turning to affectation, especially when we are at the same time with persons of the mind and nature of Mme. de Montespan, whom no absurdity escaped, and who knew so well how to make it felt by others by means of that unique wit peculiar to the family of the Mortemarts.”

Yet this same Mlle. de Fontanges, the vain and silly beauty, gave a lesson one day to Mme. de Maintenon, who exhorted her, with her stiff rectitude, to cure herself of a passion that could not make her happy: “You talk to me,” replied the young woman, “of quitting a passion as one would take off a gown.” The girl without mind was enlightened for a moment by her heart.

What distinguishes, at first sight, all these portraits of Mme. de Caylus is their delicacy; the vigour and firmness beneath them are often veiled. But there are moments when the true word comes to the surface, the keen expression breaks forth. The “impudence” of Mme. de Montespan, who grows bolder with her successive pregnancies; the “baseness” of the Condés, ambitious to ally themselves to the king by all his bastard branches; all such traits are boldly sketched, as became the granddaughter of old d’Aubigné. The king, having married the Duc du Maine, makes representations to his son about his wife, who is ruining him; “but,” says Mme. de Caylus, “seeing at last that his remonstrances only served to make a son whom he loved suffer inwardly, he took to silence, and *let him wallow* in his

blindness and weakness." There is nothing feeble in such tones. We feel, in reading these accomplished women, that Molière, not less than Racine, was present with his genius beside their cradle, and that Saint-Simon was not far off.

I could, if I chose, point out certain jollities in Mme. de Caylus which show her, in a softened style perhaps, a true daughter of Mme. de Sévigné. She knows how to change her tone when advisable and proportion her touch to her personages: "Mlle. de Rambures had the style of the Nogent family, to which her mother belonged: lively, daring, and all the mind that is needed to please even without being beautiful. She attacked the king and did not displease him. . . ." That is how she speaks when she could say all; and close beside it is a portrait drawn in two lines: "Mlle. de Jarnac, ugly and unhealthy; she has, so they say, a fine complexion which lights up her ugliness." None but Hamilton or a woman could find such shafts. "She had malice in her," says Saint-Simon.

Truthful and penetrating minds are often embarrassed by their rôle in this world: they tell what they see, the thing that is, and they run the risk of being thought malicious. Mme. de Caylus was only a truthful painter, who could not keep herself from catching objects to the life as she passed along, be those objects Mlle. de Jarnac, with her ugliness set in its finest light, or the bewitching Mlle. de Lowenstein, with her

“nymph-like waist still further set off by a flame-coloured ribbon.” The whole series of pictures in which she shows us the squadron of the dauphine’s maids of honour, and, in general, the long file of Court ladies, resembles a gallery of Hamilton, same date, same cleverness of brush, same delicate causticity, at moments cruel. Mme. de Caylus is mistress, in her way, of the art of that continual irony in which she speaks, and which the wittiest of foreign women, even those who are naturalised among us, seldom catch. The Duchesse de Bourgogne, born in Savoie, though very French in many respects, never attained it; saying sometimes to Mme. de Maintenon: “Aunt, they turn everything into ridicule here!”

Of a truth, there were many things to ridicule. The anecdotes of Mme. de Caylus are little scenes which, lightly sketched in, leave an ineffaceable impression of the comic. Will you have a scene in which M. de Montausier, or Bossuet himself plays the comic rôle? It is on the eve of some Holy Week or jubilee; the king, who was now religious, wanted to sever himself from Mme. de Montespan, who, in her way, was becoming religious too. Whereupon the lovers part, and each goes his and her own way to mourn their sins. But here let Mme. de Caylus take up her inimitable tale:

“The jubilee over, gained or not gained, it was a question of knowing whether Mme. de Montespan should return to Court: ‘Why not?’ said her parents and friends, even the most virtuous, such as

M. de Montausier. 'Mme. de Montespan by birth and office ought to be there, and she can live in as Christian a manner there as elsewhere.' The Bishop of Meaux [Bossuet] was of that opinion. There remained, they added, one difficulty: Should Mme. de Montespan appear before the king without preparation? They ought surely to see each other before meeting in public, to avoid the inconveniences of surprise. On this ground, it was decided that the king should come to Mme. de Montespan's apartments; but, in order not to give the slightest subject for scandal to lay hold of, it was arranged that certain respectable ladies, the gravest at Court, should be present at the interview, and that the king should see Mme. de Montespan in their presence only. The king accordingly came to Mme. de Montespan's apartments, as it had been arranged; but, little by little, he drew her into the embrasure of a window; they talked in a low voice for some time, weeping, and saying what is usually said in such cases; finally, they made a profound bow to the venerable matrons and retired to an inner apartment; the result was Mme. la Duchesse d'Orléans, and later M. le Comte de Toulouse."

These were the last of the seven children that the king had by Mme. de Montespan.

"I cannot," adds Mme. de Caylus, "keep myself from saying a thought that is in my mind: it seems to me that one can still see in the character, in the countenance, in the whole person of Mme. la Duchesse d'Orléans traces of this struggle between love and the jubilee."¹

Was there ever a way of telling a story more lively, gayer, bolder, more spontaneous, more natural! Nothing half-told, or told too much; all is sketched in, painted in, but nothing emphasised.

This leads us to the examination of another ques-

¹ A jubilee in the Roman Catholic Church is a solemn and general plenary indulgence granted by the Pope on certain occasions and under certain conditions.—TR.

tion, which has already been touched upon, and with which the name of Mme. de Caylus has been mingled from the beginning. What is urbanity? in what does it properly consist? Is it wholly in the conciseness and appropriateness of a witty saying? is it in irony, in pleasantry, in gaiety, or must we seek it elsewhere? An abbé, a learned man, and a wit, the Abbé Gédoyne, the same who translated Quintilian, and translated him all the better because he had been a friend of Ninon (to be with Ninon was always useful),—the Abbé Gédoyne, I say, has written on this question of urbanity, and he ends his agreeable and learned treatise by adding a eulogy on Mme. de Caylus, remarking that of all the persons he had known there was none who showed in so living a manner what he meant by the word *urbanity*. Let us see what the amiable abbé understood by that word; we shall still be concerned with Mme. de Caylus.

According to the Abbé Gédoyne, *urbanity*, that wholly Roman word, which, in its origin, signified only softness and purity of the language of the city (*urbs*) in opposition to the language of the provinces, and which was for Rome what *atticism* was for Athens,—that word came after awhile to express the characteristic of politeness, not only of speech and accent, but of mind and manners, and the whole air of individuals. Then, with time and usage, it came to express still more, and to signify not only a quality

of language and of mind, but also a sort of virtue and social and moral quality that made a man amiable to others, that embellished and made secure the social intercourse of life. In this complete and charming sense, urbanity requires a nature of kindness and gentleness, even in malice. Irony suits it, but irony that has nothing that is not amiable, irony which has been well defined as "the spice of urbanity." To have urbanity, as Gédoyne understands it, is to have *morals*; not morals in the austere sense, but in the antique sense: Horace and Cæsar had them. To have morals in this delicate sense, which is that of honourable persons, is: not to think more of one's self than of others, not to preach, not to insult any one in the name of morality. Harsh, rustic, savage, and fanatical minds are excluded from urbanity; the crabbed critic, accurate though he be, can make no pretension to it. Melancholy minds are not admitted; for a certain foundation of joy and gaiety is in all urbanity, there are smiles. If we consider the extreme pains taken by the ancients to give to their children, from the mother's breast, this delicate tact, this exquisite sensibility, we are struck with the difference in modern education:

"When one sees," remarks the great mind of Bolingbroke, "the care, the pains, the constant diligence that went to form the great men of antiquity, we wonder that there were not more of them; and when we reflect on the education of youth in our day, we are astonished that a single man arises who is capable of being useful to his country."

That remark, which seems very severe if extended over the whole of education, is evidently true if applied only to urbanity. Comparing on this point the education of our day with that of the ancients, we are surprised that anything remains to us of the word or of the thing. At the close of the seventeenth century, that is to say, the most glorious moment of our past, complaint of this decadence was already being made, and yet it was the golden age of urbanity. The women of that time, with the facility of nature which in all ages has distinguished them, succeeded better than men in presenting perfect models of that which we are seeking; they sowed the seeds of it, as it were, upon the air they breathed. It is in them, among those who wrote, that we shall more surely find proof of that becoming freedom and familiarity, that delicate satire, that ease in saying all things, which fulfilled the conditions of the ancients all the more because they themselves were unaware of it. "All that is excessive is necessarily unbecoming, and all that is *laboured* cannot have grace." So say Quintilian and Gédoyne, and we can verify the remark in reading the simple pages of Mme. de Caylus. The Abbé Gédoyne felt it so much (and it is to his honour) that, having ended his treatise with a sort of compliment to the Academicians before whom he read it, he hastens to add a postscript, indicating Mme. de Caylus as the most conclusive example, the supporting evidence of his words.

The *Eulogy* of Mme. de Caylus, printed at the end of Gédoy'n's treatise, which is from the pen of an M. Rémond (one of those lazy dilettanti who have left but a few lines behind them), shows her to us in a new light even after the praises of Choisy and Saint-Simon. We see her beautiful for many years, always agreeable, combining the flowers of mind of a Mme. de La Sablière with the solid foundation of a Mme. de La Fayette; with a gift of varied conversation and choice of topics, sometimes serious, sometimes gay, by no means hating the pleasures of the table, but redoubling her sallies when there, and presiding as a goddess, like the Helen of Homer:

"Mme. de Caylus," says M. Rémond, "led farther than Helen; she shed a joy so sweet, so bright, a taste for pleasure so noble and so elegant into the souls of her guests, that all ages and all characters were made to seem amiable and happy. So surprising is the power, or, rather, the magic of a woman who possesses a veritable charm."

There may be, perhaps, in that word "charm," and in the comparison with Helen of Troy, something alarming and misleading, if we did not know that this portrait of Mme. de Caylus was written in her last years, after her youth; and the charms referred to are those of her mind. It is thus that we must understand another passage in the same *Eulogy*, where it is said: "As soon as men made her acquaintance they were ready to quit their mistresses without a thought, because they then began to please them less; it was

difficult to live in her society without becoming her friend and her lover." These lively expressions of the platonic writer only the better render that joy of the spirit, that pure intoxication of grace unconsciously shed around her.

For—to return once more to the conclusion of Quintilian, interpreted to modern minds by Gêdoyn—ease, discretion, delicacy, no emphasis, no driving to an end, are, undoubtedly, conditions of urbanity; but all would be as nothing without a certain spirit of joy and kindness that inspires the whole: "which is properly *charm*," said La Fontaine.

I shall not insist any longer on the lightsome graces of the writer of the little book of *Souvenirs*, never completed, but so agreeable, so prettily turned, that we are glad to reread them and refresh our memories with things well known, but especially to freshen our taste for the swift and airy manner of telling them. In the art of portraiture, without seeming to attempt it, Mme. de Caylus is unrivalled. But where I especially ask my readers to follow me is into her Correspondence with Mme. de Maintenon. This goes back to the time when Mme. de Caylus, a young and pretty widow, was living in disgrace in Paris and before her return to Versailles. Mme. de Maintenon sends her good advice upon her conduct, so strict and cold that it would have given any one who was its object a desire to go against it. Mme. de Caylus neither obeyed nor disobeyed it wholly. Once

returned to Versailles, we see her in her letters — or rather her short notes, written from one room to another — displaying all her grace and prettiness to soften her aunt, to amuse and brighten her. Mme. de Maintenon, so agreeable in mind, had a grave background, sad, and even austere; she had amassed a burden of *ennui* in amusing others; she had withered her own soul in striving to please, from her youth up, those who were greater than she. So, when she found herself alone, she enjoyed solitude as a relaxation and rest. Mme. de Caylus did all she could to obtain access to her aunt in those rare moments; she coaxed her, she teased her with all due respect to make her smile: “I don’t know what the Academy would say of the word *acoquiner*,” she writes, “but I feel all its energy in you.” She calls herself the “superintendent of her pleasures,” and complains that the office is dwindling in her hands.

Mme. de Maintenon had now become indispensable to the king and to the whole royal family, who never gave her a single instant’s respite. Even when the king worked with his ministers she must be there. Oh! in those moments how Mme. de Caylus would have liked to sit smiling and silent beside her aunt! “Who does not see you, enjoys nothing,” she cries; “I have infinite regret in not sharing with you the back of M. Peletier”—doubtless M. Le Peletier de Souzy, a director-general and councillor of State, who worked every week with the king. Another day,

she envies Fanchon, the chambermaid: "Why cannot I slip in under her form during the *absence* of M. de Pontchartrain's back?"—M. de Pontchartrain being the least amusing of the ministers. Here is one of her prettiest letters, in which she speaks of herself as the "little niece," and claims from her aunt the favour of seeing her oftener.

"I reflect about your week; and I cannot think it well arranged that there should not be more in it of the little niece; why not have more of the little family? She will be just as stupid at cards as you could wish; she will work so sedately; she will listen, or read to you with so much pleasure. Finally, and this perhaps is the best way to make you receive her, she will go away at the slightest sign. If you choose to leave her with the company, she assures you, without hypocrisy, that she will find more time for it than is needed; she sees nothing in it, after all, but the coterie, and those marshals of France, who do not charm her to the point of not being able to do without them; she fears the ministers; she does not like the princesses; if it is repose you desire for her, she can only have it with you; if it is her health, she finds with you her regimen and remedy: in a word, she finds all with you, and without you nothing. After this sincere statement, order—but not as a *Néron*."

That term *Néron* often recurs under her pen to express gaily the negative habit of Mme. de Maintenon, inexorable in the privations she imposed on others as well as on herself. One day Mme. de Caylus sent her a little distaff; for Mme. de Maintenon liked to spin with her own hands; it served as an exhibition of modesty and simplicity added to all the rest. But listen to the pretty chatter with which Mme. de Caylus surrounds her distaff in sending it:

"Why have I not all the graces of a lively wit to introduce

into your solitude the liveliest of distaffs! It is pretty, if you will; but, besides that, it is given you by a person who, when she is beside you, would fain never lose it from sight. . . . Go, my distaff; there is no irony in saying that I envy you: nothing can be more true."

She is inexhaustible in her turns and returns of charming insistence on this perpetual theme; she tries to send to that old age, which seeks to mortify itself, a ray of her own brightness. "I am angry with the sun for shining so brilliantly into my room when you are not in it."

Towards the end, she enters so fully into her aunt's spirit that she is wholly one with it, and conspires with her in diverting the king: "It is certain that we are doing a great service to the State in keeping the king alive by amusing him."

Mme. de Maintenon, in spite of her airs of resistance, was not insensible to such winning grace. The Princesse des Ursins, in her letters to her, never ceased to praise her "friend" from the moment she returned to Court and to the favour of her aunt; she varies her praise in many keys: "There is nothing artificial about her; she is as lovable in mind as she is in face." "You will find infinite resources in her, no one having more intelligence, or being more amusing, without any malignity." Mme. de Maintenon in the end acknowledges in reply that she is almost conquered:

"It is true that I get on better with Mme. de Caylus than formerly, because she seems to me to have recovered from her ob-

stinacy about Jansenism, finding it difficult to be agreeably placed among persons who think differently; her face is as charming as ever, but she has a form that disfigures her much; for the rest, I see no woman here so reasonable."

Whether this change was caused by some little emotion entering Mme. de Maintenon's heart, or merely by a liking for intelligence, it is certain that she had a weakness for this niece that she felt for no other person. She calls her her "true niece," and after Louis XIV's death she turns to her with solid friendship. It is true that Mme. de Caylus is perfect in manner, respectful, and at the same time familiar; she knows so well the proper distance to keep in writing to her, the degree of information she must give, the sad news of society and the vexatious truths she must not conceal, and others on which it would be useless to enlarge; she knows well how to be serious as her pen runs on. "I say nothing to you of the beauty of your letters," writes Mme. de Maintenon, "lest I should seem to flatter, and at my age one must not change one's nature."

We might, however, take too serious an idea of Mme. de Caylus if we confined ourselves to her letters. In writing to her aunt, she presents herself without hypocrisy, but in her most matter-of-fact and sober aspect; doubtless she allowed her to see but one-half of her life. In her little house in the Luxembourg gardens, which is isolated and quite rural, and which was reached only by a long and

winding way, she appears to us like some country lady returning for a time from the grandeurs of Versailles:

"It is a delight to rise early; I look out of my window over my whole empire; I take pride in seeing under my rule twelve hens, one cock, eight chicks; a cellar which I transform into a dairy; a cow pastured near the entrance to the great garden by a tolerance that may not be of long duration. I dare not ask Mme. de Berry to endure a cow. Alas! it is enough that she endures me."

The Duchesse de Berry, here mentioned, was that daughter of the Regent who filled the palace of the Luxembourg with her orgies. Mme. de Caylus, making allusion to them, says elsewhere, in a fancy full of thought: "I am very well pleased here; I lose not a ray of sun, nor a word of the vespers of a seminary (Saint-Sulpice) where women cannot enter; 't is thus that life is mingled—on one side, this palace; on the other, the praises of God."

Mme. de Maintenon, good churchwoman that she was, felt, surely enough, that this charming niece had not become a recluse, and that she was still receiving friends of all kinds. "You may know how to do without pleasures," she writes, "but pleasures cannot do without you."

Such was Mme. de Caylus, so far as we can resuscitate her from the few pages we possess, in which, after all, we have but the smallest part of herself. But, by the help of contemporary testimony, I feel sure that I have given her nought that does not

belong to her in seeking to defend her. This eldest daughter of Saint-Cyr, this sister of Esther, who did not confine herself wholly to that gentle part, is, as it were, the last flower of the epoch, then closing, of Louis XIV; in nothing did she breathe the spirit of the coming age. Coming after the La Fayette, the Sévigné, the Maintenon, cultivated by those women, and admiring them, she resembled them only so far as to detach herself from them; she shines as their follower, the youngest, the gayest, but with her own distinct brilliancy, and her delicacy without pallor.

XII.

Jénélon.

XII.

Fénelon.¹

THE volume which will here concern us—*Lettres et Opuscules de Fénelon*—is added as an indispensable complement to the twenty-two volumes of his *Œuvres* and to the eleven volumes of his *Correspondance*, that is to say, to the very fine and very good edition presided over by the Abbé Gosselin and the Abbé Caron. This new volume unites, with

¹ The following Essay is not a brief sketch of Fénelon's life, such as Sainte-Beuve gave of Molière, La Fontaine, and others; it is a review of his Letters, with incidental comments on his life and character. Some parts of it are here omitted. Fénelon was attached to the Seminary of Saint-Sulpice when the Duc de Beauvilliers, governor of the Duc de Bourgogne, son of Monseigneur, the only son of Louis XIV, selected him as tutor for the young prince. In that capacity he won the respect and affection of all until he came under the influence of Mme. Guyon and showed leanings toward mysticism. Mme. de Maintenon, the king, and the clergy influential at Court turned against him, and occasion was offered by his publication of a certain book, *Maximes des Saints*, to send him into exile in his archbishopric of Cambrai. With a beautiful nature, he was cautious, ambitious, and something of a time-server: had he possessed the courage of his opinions we might have known more of the mystical truth revealed by Mme. Guyon, who was then what we should now call a *seer*, or, perhaps, a medium. Had Fénelon been a stronger man the doctrine of Quietism, so called, might have done more work in the world.—TR.

some writings not without interest and a few letters of business and administration, other letters of spiritual guidance, and especially certain charming letters of friendship and familiarity: in them we find the whole of Fénelon. Some of them are addressed to Mme. de Maintenon, by whom, as we know, Fénelon was greatly protected, consulted, and listened to until she had the weakness to abandon him.

Saint-Simon, in his Memoirs, has so vividly related the arrival of Fénelon at Court, his initiation into the little inmost circle of Mme. de Maintenon and the Ducs de Beauvilliers and de Chevreuse, the rapid rise of the fortunate prelate, so quickly followed by many vicissitudes, a great downfall, and that shipwreck of hopes which is to-day so touching a part of his fame, that one can only send the reader to such a painter, feeling it to be a profanation to rewrite the picture, even though we may think some points of it rash. Saint-Simon was gifted with a twofold genius seldom united to the degree we find in him: he received from nature the gift of penetration, almost of intuition, the gift of reading minds and hearts through the countenance, and of seizing thus upon the secret play of motives and intentions; he carried into this piercing observation of the masks and actors who swarmed around him in vast numbers a vigour, an ardour of curiosity that seems at times insatiable, and almost cruel: the eager anatomist is not more prompt to open the still palpitating breast, and to probe it in

every direction to find the hidden wound. To this first gift of instinctive and irresistible penetration, Saint-Simon added another, which also is seldom found with the same degree of power, and the daring use of which constitutes him unique in his own special work: that which he had, as it were, wrenched out with his relentless curiosity, he could write down with the same fire, the same ardour, and almost with the same fury of stroke. La Bruyère also had the faculty of penetrating and sagacious observation; he notices, he uncovers all things and all men around him; he shrewdly reads the secrets on all the foreheads before him; then, alone in his study, at leisure, he traces his portraits with delight, with skill, and slowly; he begins them over and over, he retouches, he caresses them, adding feature to feature, until he finds them a perfect likeness. It is not so with Saint-Simon, who, after his days at Versailles or Marly, which I call his debauches of observation (so much did he amass that was profuse, conflicting, and diverse), re-enters his own room at fever-heat, and there, pen in hand, at full speed, without resting, without reading over his words, and far into the night, he dashes down, all living, on his paper, in their amplitude and natural confusion, yet with an incomparable clearness of relief, the crowd of personages he has passed through, the originals he has caught on his way and carried off, palpitating still, the majority of whom have become, thanks to him, immortal victims.

A little more and he might have made Fénelon one of those victims; for, in the midst of the charming and delightful qualities he recognises in him, he harps perpetually on a secret vein of ambition which, in the degree which he supposes, would have made Fénelon quite another man to the one we like to see in reality. On this point, I think that this picture of the great painter ought to undergo, in order to be true, a slight reduction, and that his ardour of introspection has taken too much latitude. He did not penetrate and live at leisure in all parts of that amiable soul. Saint-Simon knew Fénelon through the Ducs de Beauvilliers and Chevreuse as well as a man can be known through his intimate friends. Personally, he knew him very little, and he tells us so: "I knew him only by sight, being too young when he was exiled." Nevertheless, to such a painter, that mere sight was enough to let him grasp and marvellously render Fénelon's charm:

"This prelate," he says, "was a tall, thin man, well made, with a large nose, eyes from which the fire and intellect gushed like a torrent, and a countenance the like of which I have never seen, and which, once seen, could never be forgotten. It united all things; yet the contradictions never clashed. It had gravity and gallantry, solemnity and gaiety; it equally expressed the learned man, the bishop, and the great seigneur; but what was manifest above all, and in his whole person as well as in his countenance, was elegance, refinement, intellect, grace, decorum, and, especially, nobleness. It required an effort to cease looking at him. . . ."

When a writer has once painted a man in that way, and shown him gifted with such powers of attraction,

he can never be afterwards accused of calumniating him, even though he may be mistaken on some points. With Saint-Simon we can best confute and correct Saint-Simon himself. Read what he says so admirably about the Duc de Bourgogne, that cherished pupil of Fénelon, who never ceased to guide him from afar, even from his exile at Cambrai, through the channels of the Ducs de Beauvilliers and Chevreuse. The young prince, whom Saint-Simon shows to us first as haughty, impetuous, terribly passionate by nature, and contemptuous of all about him, of whom he could say: "From the height of his skies he looked on men as atoms with whom he had nothing in common, whatever they might be"—this same young prince, at a certain moment, transformed himself, and became a wholly different man, pious, humane, charitable, as well as enlightened, attentive to his duties, wholly absorbed in his responsibility as future king, and daring to utter, he the heir of Louis XIV and in the salons of Marly, a saying fitted to make the very arches crumble: "A king is made for his subjects and not the subjects for him." Well, that young prince thus presented by Saint-Simon, whose death tore from him—from him, the inexorable observer—words of emotional eloquence and tears, who was it who thus transformed him? Allowing for the part due to that which is mysterious and invisible in changes of heart, even that which is called grace; allowing for the share of the venerable Duc

de Beauvilliers, the excellent governor, who, I ask, among human instruments, played so large a part as Fénelon? Near or far, he never ceased to guide his pupil, to inculcate upon him, and to insinuate into him that maxim of *father of the nation*: "that a king is made for the people," and all that hangs upon it.

We now know, in some respects, more than Saint-Simon knew: we have the confidential letters of Fénelon, addressed at all periods to the young prince; the notes that he wrote down for him, the plans of reform, all the papers then kept secret but now divulged, and which, allowing to human ambition the place it must always hold in every man even in his virtues, show the latter as belonging to the highest rank, and place for evermore in its full light the generous and patriotic soul of Fénelon.

Bossuet also, in concert with the Duc de Montausier, trained a pupil, the first dauphin, Monseigneur, father of the Duc de Bourgogne; it was for that royal and little worthy pupil that he composed many admirable works, beginning with the *Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*, of which posterity will for ever reap the benefit. But looking at the matter closely, what difference of care and solicitude! Monseigneur, no doubt, was less amenable to instruction, possessed as he was by a gentleness that amounted to apathy. The Duc de Bourgogne, with passions and even vices, had at least an inward impulse revealing the

sacred fire. "Eager and excitable natures," says Fénelon, "are capable of terrible errors; passions and presumption lead them astray; but also they have great inward resources, and often they return from very great distances . . . whereas, one has little or no hold on sluggish natures." Yet we see that Bossuet did very nearly, in order to conquer the laziness of his pupil and spur his sensibility, what Fénelon did in the second case to subdue and harmonise the violence of his. The first great man did his duty with amplitude and majesty, as he was wont to do it, and then passed on. The second continued his attentions and fears, his ingenious and vigilant cares, his insinuating and persuasive appeals, as if he were held to them by some bond of nature itself; he had the tenderness of a mother.

To return to the present volume; I have said that we there find some letters which Fénelon, lately arrived at Court, addressed to Mme. de Maintenon, still under the spell of his charm. The tone of his *Lettres Spirituelles* is, in general, delicate, refined, easy, and very agreeable to gentle and feminine minds, but a little soft and tainted with the jargon of Quietist spirituality; we feel the near neighbourhood of Mme. Guyon. Fénelon is also too much given to infantile and mincing expressions, such as Saint-François de Sales addressed to his ideal, his Philothea. Speaking of the familiarities and the caresses which, according to him, the Heavenly Father bestows on souls that become

once more childlike and simple, Fénelon, for example, says: "One must be a child, O my God! and play at thy knee to deserve them." Theologians have quarrelled with these expressions, and others like them, from the point of view of doctrine; severe good taste would suffice to proscribe them. And it is here that the manly and wholesome manner of Bossuet, brought to bear upon all subjects, asserts its superiority.

I know, in speaking thus of Fénelon's letters, the exceptions that ought to be made; some are very fine on all points and very solid; such, for instance, as the one to a lady of quality on the education of her daughter; such also as the *Lettres sur la Religion*, supposed to have been addressed to the Duc d'Orléans (the future regent), and which are usually placed at the end of the treatise on *L'Existence de Dieu*. But I am here speaking only of the *Lettres Spirituelles*, properly so called, and I do not fear that those who have read a goodly number of them will contradict me.

Mme. de Maintenon, while receiving Fénelon's letters, and enjoying their infinite delicacy, judged them, nevertheless, with the excellent mind and the good common sense which she applied to all that did not exceed her mental range and the horizon of her daily life. She had doubts about certain expressions a little too vivid and somewhat rash, the details of which I need not give here. To clear her mind, she consulted another confessor, Godet, Bishop of Chartres, and Fénelon was called upon to explain and justify

himself. In his explanation (which we find in this volume), by which he endeavours to reduce his mystical and rather strange expressions to their proper value, I am struck with an habitual skill in turning a subject, which is one of his characteristics. While maintaining his expressions, or, at any rate, justifying them by means of respectable authorities, he ends every paragraph by saying, and repeating, under various forms: "A prophet (or a saint) has already said before me something equivalent, or even stronger; nevertheless, *I submit*." That constant affirming of submission, reiterated at the end of every justification that he offers as convincing, produces in the long run a singular effect, and actually ends by annoying those who are least theological. I call it an irritating gentleness, and the impression given supports the remark of M. Joubert: "The mind of Fénelon had something softer than gentleness, more patient than patience"; which also is a fault.

What, of a certainty, is not faulty, is the general character of his piety; that which he feels and that which he inspires. He desires in it joy, lightheartedness, sweetness; he would banish harshness and sadness: "Piety," he said, "has nothing weak, nor sad, nor constrained; it widens the heart, it is simple and pleasant, it makes itself all things to all men to win all." He reduces nearly all piety to love, that is, to charity. But this gentleness in him is not weakness or fawning compliance. In the few letters of

advice to Mme. de Maintenon that are given in this volume, he lays his finger on essential things; on that “self-love that seeks to take all upon itself”; on that slavery to consideration by others; that ambition to appear perfect in the eyes of persons of note,—in short, all that constituted the foundation of her prudent and self-glorifying nature. There is in the *Lettres Spirituelles* a certain variation by which we see Fénelon adapting and proportioning himself to individuals, and he must have had this same variety in his conversation. The *Entretiens*, transmitted to us by Ramsay, in which Fénelon developed to him the reasons that ought to lead every one, as he thought, from deism to Catholicism, are of a breadth, a simple beauty, a full and luminous eloquence, that leave nothing to be desired. Just as *L’Entretien* of Pascal and M. de Saci is one of the finest testimonies to Pascal’s mind, so these *Entretiens* with Ramsay give the highest idea of Fénelon’s manner, and surpass in breadth of tone most of his letters.

The most interesting part of the volume just published is a series of familiar letters addressed by Fénelon to one of his friends, a soldier of merit, the Chevalier Destouches. During the last wars of Louis XIV, all who were most distinguished in the army (the army itself passing at each campaign through Cambrai) visited Fénelon and received his hospitality. With the attraction that was natural to him, he retained from these passing acquaintances more than

one lasting friend. His friendship with the Chevalier Destouches was one of the closest and tenderest. Destouches, then about forty-three years of age, served with distinction in the artillery; he was a man of intelligence, cultivated, taking special delight in Virgil. Dissipated withal, given to pleasures, to those of the table, which, for him, were not the only ones; and we are forced to admit that his intimacy with Fénelon never entirely cured him, inasmuch as he is supposed to have been the father of d'Alembert, by Mme. de Tencin, in 1717. However that may be, Fénelon loved him, and that word redeems all. The kindly prelate says it to him in many tones, scolding him, schooling him, and seeing plainly that he succeeded very little in reforming him.

“If you were to show my letter,” he writes to him one April day, “to some grave and stern censor, he would not fail to remark: ‘How can that old bishop (Fénelon was then sixty-three) love a man so irreligious!’ It is a great scandal, I acknowledge; but how can I correct it? The truth is, I find two men in you; you are as dual as Sosie, without any duplicity; on the one side you are bad for yourself; on the other you are true, upright, noble to your friends. I end by words of protestation, taken from your friend, Pliny the Younger: *neque enim amore decipior*. . . .”

That is to say: “Affection does not blind me; it is true I love with enthusiasm, but I judge, and with all the more penetration because I love.”

This correspondence with the Chevalier Destouches shows Fénelon to us in the sad years of his exile (1711-1714), amusing himself, sometimes with

innocent playfulness, sporting, like Lelius and Scipio, after loosening his belt. He seems to have proposed to himself a wager in this correspondence, as if he had said to his rather libertine friend: "You love Virgil, you like to quote him; well, I'll send you Horace; I don't require, in order to beat you, any other auxiliary than he, for I can manage to insinuate into you nearly all the Christian advice that you need, or, at any rate, all that would be useful to your life, by disguising it under the verses of Horace." Horace, in fact, appears on every page of the letters; he speaks as often as Fénelon. These letters give an idea of what the latter's conversation must have been: most charming and distinguished in his hours of gaiety and sportiveness; they are the table-talk, the "after-dinner" talk of Fénelon, all that we can fancy most playful and smiling in the moral key. We catch, as though we were present, the habits of feeling and thinking, the exact tone of this fine nature. Destouches had sent the bishop a few Latin epitaphs: "Those epitaphs," replies Fénelon, "have great force, each line is an epigram; they are historic and learned. Those who made them have much wit, but they meant to have it; whereas wit ought to come by chance and without reflection. They are made in the spirit of Tacitus, who *digs into evil*." Farther on, after quoting Homer on Peace, Fénelon recalls a stanza by Malherbe: "There we see the ancient who is simple, graceful, exquisite, and here is the modern who has his own

beauty." How well said that is! how well observed the proportion, the shades, between the ancient and the modern writer, and how we are made to feel that he prefers the ancient!

That year, 1711, was an important one for Fénelon. The first dauphin died in April, and the Duc de Bourgogne became the heir, and to all appearance the immediate heir to the throne. In his distant exile at Cambrai Fénelon was felt by all to receive the rays of that coming grandeur, and to reign already by the side of his royal pupil. Consulted in writing on all matters political and ecclesiastical, umpire much listened to secretly in the quarrels of Jansenism, once more a teacher and oracle, already the great rôle was his. But, all of a sudden, misfortunes fell. The Duchesse de Bourgogne died on the 12th of February, 1712; the Duc de Bourgogne followed her on the 18th, at twenty-nine years of age, and all the hopes, all the prospects—shall I dare to say all the secret ambitions?—of the prelate vanished. We find traces of his profound grief in his correspondence, but his words are simple, true, and cast far from him all censorious thought. Learning of the death of the princess he writes to Destouches (February 18th):

"The sad news that has come to us, Monsieur, from where you are, takes from me the joy that was the soul of our intercourse: *Quis desiderio sit pudor*. . . . Truly the loss is very great for the Court and for the kingdom. They say a thousand good things of the princess and increase them daily. One must be deeply pained for those who regret her with such just sorrow. You see how frail life is!

Four days, and those not sure! Each man thinks he is secure, as if he were immortal; the world is but a mob of living, feeble, phantom beings, about to rot; the most dazzling fortune is but a flattering dream."

Those are not the grand tones, the strong beating wings of Bossuet in his pulpit, crying out: "Madame is dying! Madame is dead!" But with less lightning, less thunder, Fénelon's words are not less eloquent, and quite as piercing.

On learning of the death of the Duc de Bourgogne, Fénelon writes but one sentence; it is brief, deep-felt, and all it should be: "I suffer, God knows; but I have not fallen ill, and that is much for me. Your heart, which feels for mine, comforts me. I should be distressed to see you here; take care of your own bad health; it seems to me that all I love is about to die." To write thus to the Chevalier Destouches in such a sorrow was to place him very high.

The rebound of the world's favours after this cruel death was quickly felt by Fénelon. The night before, he was the man of the coming reign, the centre of all future hopes; on the morrow he was nothing, his dream had crumbled away, and if he could forget it for a moment, the world was ever there to remind him. A man of importance, a friend of Destouches, had offered his daughter to Fénelon's nephew; the day after the death of the Duc de Bourgogne this man withdrew his promise. Fénelon was not surprised; nor did he blame the father's attention to the solid

establishment of his daughter; he even praises and thanks him for the promptitude of his action:

"As for your friend," he writes to Destouches, "I entreat you not to be angry with him for this change; at most his blame is to have hoped too much from a frail and uncertain support; it is on such frail hopes that the worldly wise are too accustomed to fasten certain projects. Whoso will not forgive others for such things would become a misanthrope: we should avoid such perils in our own lives, and forgive them in our neighbours."

Admirable and serene, or, at least, tranquil in mind, Fénelon knows the world and mankind to their depths; he has no illusions about them. But he is not a misanthrope, and had he ever become one, it would have been in a manner that resembled no other:

"I am very glad, my dear, good man," he writes to Destouches, "that you are pleased with one of my letters that they have read to you. You are right in saying and thinking that I ask little of nearly all men; I try to give them much, and to expect nothing. I find I am the better for this bargain; with this condition, I defy them to deceive me. There is a very small number of true friends on whom I rely, not from self-interest, but from pure esteem; not wishing to obtain something from them, but to do them justice in not distrusting their hearts. I should like to serve the whole human race, and, above all, good men; but there is scarcely any one to whom I am willing to be under obligation. Is it from haughtiness and pride that I say this? Nothing could be sillier or more out of place. But I have learned, in growing old, to know men, and I believe that it is best to do without them, without letting it be known." "I pity men," he says elsewhere, "though they are seldom good."

This rarity of good men, which seems to him "the shame of the human race," brought him to stronger love for his chosen friends: "Comparison only makes

us feel the more the value of true, sweet, safe, reasonable persons, open to friendship and above self-interests." Once only do we find him showing any inquiring interest in others, and then it is for Prince Eugène, in whom he thinks he perceives a truly great man. He owns that he would like to know him and observe him:

"His actions in war are grand, but what I esteem most in him are qualities in which what is called fortune has no part. They tell me he is true, without ostentation, without haughtiness, ready to listen without prejudice, and to answer in precise terms. He goes apart by himself at times to read; he values merit; he adapts himself to all nations; he inspires confidence. That is the man you are about to see. I wish I could see him, too, in our Low Countries; I own I have a curiosity about him, though I have little left for the human race."

The death of the Duc de Beauvilliers, in 1714, broke the last tie that bound Fénelon to the future: "True friends," he wrote to Destouches on this occasion, "make all the sweetness and all the bitterness of life." In these new Letters we find a few other details on the last year of Fénelon's life (1714). The peace just signed imposed fresh duties upon him.

"That which ends your work," he writes to Destouches, "begins mine; peace gives you the freedom it takes from me; I have seven hundred and sixty-four villages to visit. You will not be surprised that I wish to do my duty—you whom I have seen so scrupulous in doing yours, in spite of your wound and your infirmities."

Six weeks before his death, during one of his pastoral visitations, his carriage was overturned and he came near being killed; he relates the incident very pleasantly:

“A rather long absence has delayed the answers I owe you. It is true, dear man, that I was in great danger of losing my life, and I do not now see how I escaped; never was any one so willing to lose three horses. My servants called out: ‘All is lost! save yourself!’ I did not hear them, for the windows were up. I was reading a book, with my spectacles on my nose and a pencil in my hand; my legs were in a bearskin bag, about as Archimedes was when he perished at the siege of Syracuse. The comparison is conceited, but the accident was frightful.”

He gives the details. A mill-wheel started to turn as the carriage was on a bridge without parapets; one of the horses was frightened and sprang off, and the rest followed.

Until the last, in spite of his inward sadness, and though his heart was ever sick after the death of his cherished pupil, Fénelon could smile, and without too much effort. He had by nature that light-hearted gaiety, which is not either volatile or false; in him it was the natural impulse of a chaste, equable, and temperate mind; he had that joy of which (as he says so well) “frugality, health, and innocence are the source.” In his last letter he jokes Destouches on the “pretty repasts” to which the chevalier was given, at the risk of being forced to repent. “It is at Cambrai,” he says, “that people are sober, healthy, light-hearted, content, and gay under rules.” In reading this familiar correspondence, I am made to find once more in the whole of Fénelon something gay, quick, lively, slow, easy, insinuating, and magnetic [*enchanteur*].

Among the pleasantries to be found there, are some that relate to the quarrel between the Ancients and

the Moderns, which was then at its height in the bosom of the Academy, growing more and more vehement when peace was signed in Europe. La Motte, a friend of Destouches, had translated and travestied the Iliad of Homer, and he sent it to Fénelon, asking his opinion. Fénelon was here rather weak. Invoked as judge and arbiter by both sides, he evaded the subject. He thought that in matters that did not concern the safety of the State people might, perhaps, be more accommodating than in others, and more inclined to politeness. He answered La Motte with compliments and praises, but did not commit himself on the real point; he got out of it by quoting a line of Virgil, which leaves the victory undecided between two shepherds: *Et vitula tu dignas, et hic.* . . . It was Fénelon, the translator, the continuator of the Odyssey, the father of *Télémaque*, who could talk thus. How is it possible to push tolerance to such a point! Evidently, Fénelon had not that irritability of good sense and reason that forces a man to say "No!" with vehemence; that prompt and honest faculty, a little brusque it may be, that Boileau brought to literature, and Bossuet to theology. In this we again find a feeble side.

Each man has his glory and his shadows. We may find Fénelon in fault on certain points. Bossuet, in theology, pushed him hard. I find him equally refuted and forcibly reprimanded in connection with his *Dialogues sur l'Éloquence* and certain of his assertions

about ancient authors, by Gibert, a well-informed man, with a vigorous and in no way despicable mind. But of what importance to-day are such mistakes and inaccuracies? Fénelon had the spirit of piety, and also the spirit of antiquity. In himself he unites the two spirits; or, rather, he possesses and contains them, each in its own sphere, without contention, without struggle, without discordance of any kind; and that is a great charm. For him, the battle between Christianity and Greece did not exist, and *Télémaque* is the unique monument to this fortunate and well-nigh impossible harmony.

Télémaque is not the pure antique. The pure antique to-day would be more or less imitation and *pastiche*. We have had striking instances of the antique studied and made over with passion and knowledge. *Télémaque* is another thing; something far more naïf and original even in its imitation. It is the antique laid hold of naturally and without effort by a modern genius, a Christian heart, which, fed on the speech of Homer, recalls it freely and draws from it as from a spring, but remakes and transforms it unconsciously while in the act of remembering it. This beauty thus turned aside, softened, not impaired, glides a full stream in Fénelon's channel, overflowing into a fountain always playing, always sacred, which adapts itself easily to its new slopes and its new shores. To appreciate *Télémaque* as it should be, there is but one thing to do: forget, if you can, that

you read it in childhood. I had that happiness a year ago; I had, as it were, forgotten *Télémaque*, and I was able to read it again with the freshness of novelty.

From the literary point of view, many have greatly praised and striven to define Fénelon, but nowhere has it been done, as I think, with a happier expression of feeling and a more touching resemblance than in the following passage, which relates to his eloquence as much as to his person: "What he made people feel were not transports, but a succession of peaceable and ineffable feelings: there was in his discourse I know not what tranquil harmony, I know not what sweet slowness, I know not what long, lingering graces that no expression can render." It is a Choc-taw who says that in "The Natchez." It is strange to meet with such a speech in the mouth of an American savage, but it is not less beautiful and perfect and worthy to be inscribed at the close of Fénelon's own pages.

Fénelon was, above all else, a perfect and supreme director of consciences. I go at once to the objection that can be made to this statement. As such, as arbitrator of souls, he had his errors, he went astray, he yielded too completely to his tastes and predilections. There was in his life a critical moment, when the inclination and the particular vocation that he felt for inward direction and for the delicate mysteries of piety misled and slightly intoxicated him. Meeting in Mme.

Guyon a tender and subtile soul, who apparently revived all the traditions of the most saintly and the most admitted fervours, he forgot himself too much in speculating with her and in vying with her in research and relinquishment. Let us pass a sponge over that moment of illusion and forgetfulness, in which, moreover, we cannot take a single step without obscurity and bewilderment. It is not for us, and this is not the place, to enter into elucidations of what they called "the different degrees of Prayer" [*les divers degrés d'Oraison*]; we can only remain upon the threshold, and with difficulty there. I shall therefore take Fénelon wholly outside of that affair of Quietism, and simply as a most delicate, most perceptive, most adaptable and acceptable guide that many anxious souls consulted and some devoted friends.

The *Lettres Spirituelles* bear specially on these points of the inward life, and by them he teaches how to make true progress in the "art of loving God." This volume, well known and valued as it is, is not the one that I chiefly recommend to people of the world, nor is it the one that I prefer. It is too exclusively a collection of inward matters, leaving out all that relates to events, persons, and society; all, in short, that would give it reality. The best way, as I think, to read the *Lettres Spirituelles* of Fénelon, when it is desired to make a slow and just use of them, is to read them in connection with the edition of the

Correspondance in eleven volumes. There we find the names, dates, events, and all the circumstances that make the matter living.

For example, we know the Comtesse de Grammont; she was a Hamilton, sister of the spicy and satirical writer, Antoine Hamilton, and wife of the Comte de Grammont, so well known for his *Memoirs*, written down for him by his brother-in-law. Brought very young to France by her parents during the civil wars in England, she was educated at Port-Royal; for which she always preserved an attachment. Returning later to France as Comtesse de Grammont, the most noted woman at Court, haughty, brilliant, of easy virtue, but respected and esteemed through all her dissipations, she retained, when growing old, the remains of beauty, and made herself acceptable at all times to Louis XIV, to the point of giving umbrage now and then to Mme. de Maintenon. Saint-Simon and Mme. de Caylus tell us all this, and do not leave us ignorant of the vagaries of temper and character that made her a person even more interesting than amiable. Well, the Comtesse de Grammont is one of the spiritual correspondents of Fénelon; not precisely one of his penitents, although he seems to have been the person who contributed most to bring her back and fix her to ideas of religion; and it was not until Fénelon was in exile at Cambrai that the countess returned to her former ways at Port-Royal and declared herself openly on that side. Until then, and so long

as Fénelon was within reach, she kept a middle course.

It was towards the age of forty-five that the Comtesse de Grammont began to change her ways, and to think of regulating her life. She had much to do:

“You have a great deal to fear both within and without,” wrote Fénelon. “Without, the world smiles upon you; and the part of the world that is most capable of feeding pride gives yours all that can gratify it in the marks of consideration you receive at Court. Within, you have to surmount a taste for a refined and dainty life, a spirit haughty and disdainful, and a long habit of dissipation. All that, taken together, is a torrent that will sweep away even the best resolutions.”

He advises her, as a true remedy, to save, each day, some hours for prayer and reading; but were it only half an hour, he says, in the morning; and half a quarter of an hour taken from excitements and well managed would still be good. “It is in such moment’s that we renew ourselves before God, and repair in haste the breaches the world has made.”

Silence, above all, seems to him a great remedy, and the only one in the moments thus snatched from the world. Imagine the sister of Hamilton, like him in mind, in satirical charms, in subtile, imperceptible, elegant, pitiless, and vengeful irony—imagine her cutting off all that and leaving to others the honours of conversation! “You cannot conquer your disdainful, mocking, haughty spirit except in holding it chained by silence. . . . You cannot fast too rigidly from the pleasures of worldly conversation. You must

humble yourself incessantly; you will rise again only too soon." He knows the spot he touches, and he returns to it repeatedly: "Preserve inward meditation even in conversation; you have more need than others of this antidote." But this silence to which she is required to condemn herself must not be a "cold and disdainful silence"; for self-love driven back has many byways of return; "it must, on the contrary, be a silence of deference to others." Thus does Fénelon, on every tone and with infinite skill, endeavour to instil charity for one's neighbour into the sister of Hamilton.

But he sees another rock, another peril within her: "You have more need to be humiliated," he tells her, "than to receive more light." These lights of religion, as he very well knows, the countess received from childhood at Port-Royal; she has greater need, in turning from the world to religion, to learn not to pass from one self-love to another, not to seek to excel or to be a marvel in a new sense:

"What I desire for you is smallness and simplicity of mind. I fear for you a *luminous* and lofty devotion, which, under pretext of seeking the real and lasting thing in reading and in practice, nourishes in secret I know not what of grandeur that is contrary to the child Christ Jesus, simple and despised of the sages of the century. We must be a child with him. I pray him with all my heart, madame, to take from you not only your defects, but also your taste for grandeur in virtue, and to humble you by grace."

There is nothing in these letters of Fénelon to Mme. de Grammont, that exceeds what the delicate good

sense of the most enlightened director of consciences should counsel and prescribe.

Some of the letters addressed to her do, however, go much farther and develop the important and always intelligible points of Fénelon's doctrine of piety. The Stoics, Epictetus, for instance, lay it down as a principle that to be happy and virtuous we must withdraw ourselves within ourselves and within the bounds of all external things that depend upon us; cutting off whatever is without, raising the draw-bridge, as it were, so that all communication be merely formal, and not affect uses sentimentally. Fénelon, like all true Christians, found that way of attaining to virtue and happiness very gloomy and insufficient; it is not in seeking solitude, in withdrawing within self, that he thinks it possible to find peace; for in us, in our nature, is the root of all our ills; so long as we remain selfishly shut up within ourselves we are exposed to all painful and sorrowful impressions:

“Our temper exposes us to that of others; our passions clash with those of our neighbours; our desires are just so many points at which we lay ourselves open to the darts of other men; our pride, which is incompatible with the pride of our neighbour, rises like the waves of an angry sea; all fight us, all attack us, we are exposed on all sides by the sensitiveness of our passions and the jealousy of our pride.”

The remedy, to his mind, is to find peace by coming out of self; to rise by prayer, and lose that self as much as possible in thoughts of the infinite Being, the fatherly Being, loving and good, and always present;

to obtain, if possible, that his will be substituted for ours: "Then shall we know the true peace reserved for men of right will . . . ; then can men do naught against us, for they cannot touch us through our desires nor through our fears; then shall we will all and will nothing. This is to be inaccessible to enemies, to become invulnerable." That in the doctrines of the later Stoics, and even in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, there was a beginning of this method of conceiving the enfranchisement of the spirit, I do not deny; but such thoughts did not have their full illumination and accomplishment until Christ brought into the world the idea of God that he came to reveal. The doctrine of Fénelon, freed from certain refinements of expression and over-niceties peculiar to his manner of feeling and writing, is no other than the Christian doctrine in its most spiritual vigour.

In his correspondence with Mme. de Montbérón he thinks he is, or says he is, sometimes cold and uncertain: on the contrary, he enters, in a keen and rapid manner, into all the delicacies of Divine love; he explains in clear, prompt terms its theory, as we should say, its precepts; he makes it simple, but a simplicity we do not perceive at a glance. As he has to do with a soul more scrupulous, more subtile than that of Mme. de Grammont, he goes farther and deeper than with the latter. He insists upon the rather subtile point that, in prayer, we must try to hush ourselves to let the spirit of God speak in us:

“There is no longer real silence,” he says, “when we listen to ourselves. After having listened, we answer, and in that dialogue a secret self-love silences God. Peace for you is in a very delicate simplicity.”

It is in this doctrine of silence and quietude in prayer that we find the germ of what is called Quietism, which may become illusion. I say no more, and pass on hastily. In general, Fénelon’s “delicate simplicity” is not that from which we start, but that to which we return by force of mind, of art, and of taste. I will not try now to investigate and define it, having still to show its more serious aspects. . . . To-day I have only skimmed my subject; but, in truth, these matters of spirituality cannot be given in great quantities at a time. It remains to show Fénelon on his firmer and stronger sides, in his correspondence, half spiritual, half political, with the Duc de Chevreuse and the Duc de Bourgogne—the close of the reign of Louis XIV as seen from Cambrai.

Among Fénelon’s letters there are none more interesting and more instructive than those he wrote to the Duc de Chevreuse. It was through him, principally, that Fénelon, during the seventeen years of his exile at Cambrai, continued to correspond with his pupil, the Duc de Bourgogne.

The Duc de Chevreuse, like the Comtesse de Grammont, was a former pupil of Port-Royal; but, unlike the countess, he did not preserve an affection for it. He always, however, retained some effect of it in his

mind, his method of reasoning, close and logical, and in his erudite, polished, and pure language. It was for the Duc de Chevreuse, when a child, that Arnauld composed the *Logique*, called that of Port-Royal. The duke did not profit by it in the sense and spirit that Arnauld expected. One of the remarks of that judicious "Logic" is, that the greater part of men's errors come less because they reason ill on true principles than because they reason well on false ones. The Duc de Chevreuse, such as we see him in Saint-Simon and in his correspondence with Fénelon, appears to us precisely a type of the men who reason wonderfully, reason too well, reason on everything, and *ad infinitum*, only the principle from which they start is false and contestable.

"One was lost," says Saint-Simon, "if one did not stop him in the beginning; because as soon as he had been allowed to pass two or three propositions which seemed simple, and which he made to result from one another, he led his man by beat of drum and colours flying to his end. People felt he was wrong, but he reasoned so closely that there was no finding a joint at which to break the chain"

The Duc de Chevreuse, honest, sedulous, laborious, treating all questions methodically, exhausting himself in combining facts and drawing inductions and conclusions for ever, had something in him of the doctrinaire and the statistician combined (we still have some of the kind): with much intellect, worth, capacity, and knowledge, he never came to be more than a good, wrong mind [*bon esprit faux*]. It was

certainly not worth while to write the most simple and sensible of *Logiques* expressly for him, and attain, in his person, such results.

Fénelon did his best to correct the Duc de Chevreuse in his intellectual excesses and to cure him of them:

“I always fear,” he writes to him in 1695, “your excessive tendency to reason; it is an obstacle to the silence and inward composure in which God communicates himself. Let us be simple, humble, sincerely detached from men; let us be calm, meditative, not arguers with God. The men you used formerly to listen to are dry, cold, critical reasoners, opposed to the true inward life. However little you listen to them, you will always hear endless arguments and dangerous inquiries which will put you insensibly away from grace, and cast you back into your natural self.”

It was, in truth, the whole nature of the Duc de Chevreuse that he was trying to remake from head to foot; Fénelon's counsels are given in lively and personal terms, which now serve as features for a faithful portrait of the good duke. “I have often remarked that you are always in a hurry to go from one occupation to another, but that, nevertheless, each of them leads you too far. You follow your spirit of anatomy into everything. You are not slow, but you are long.” And again: “You are too accustomed to let your mind plod.” To the Comtesse de Grammont, satirical and pungent, he counsels “fasting from worldly conversation”; to the Duc de Chevreuse, absorbed in his speculations, he counsels “fasting from ratiocination”: “When you cease to reason you will die to self, for

reasoning is the whole of your life. . . . The more you reason the more you give food to your philosophic life. Yield yourself up to simplicity and to the mania of the Cross."

The Duc de Bourgogne holds naturally a large place, the largest place, in Fénelon's Correspondence during these years, and it is to us the most interesting part of it; it is like a semi-poetic and romantic light suddenly thrown for our benefit upon history. Young princes, the objects of so many prayers and hopes, who never lived to fulfil them, those to whom the voice of peoples, like the voice of the poet, has said: "If 'tis given thee to vanquish the inimical Fates, thou shalt be Marcellus"—these incompleated figures that imagination often crowns, present, as they flit by, a problem that the most serious and least visionary minds may well meditate upon, at least for a moment. It is thus with the Duc de Bourgogne; we cannot, as we cross these last years of Louis XIV, meet the original, singular, and puzzling figure of Fénelon's pupil without asking ourselves: "What wholly different results would have come in history, what turn would things have taken for France, had he lived?"

I shall say at once that the idea of the Duc de Bourgogne which we obtain in reading Fénelon is not exactly the same as that which is given by Saint-Simon. And here is a singular thing: we get from Saint-Simon a stronger and more favourable impression of the Duc de Bourgogne than we do from Fénelon.

Whether it was that the latter, in his distant exile, did not fully know the good qualities tardily developed in the young prince, the superior merits praised so highly in the last year of his life, or whether Fénelon was too disposed to judge him always as a child, towards whom, as former master and tutor, he was bound to be more severe and exacting than he would be to others, it is certain that Fénelon's letters are continually filled with censure, most distinctly pronounced, except in those of the last eight months of the prince's life.

What Fénelon wrote to the Duc de Bourgogne he never ceased to repeat to him through the channel of the Duc de Chevreuse; he is hurt in his religion as an enlightened Christian, in his tenderness as foster-father, in his patriotism as a citizen, to see a prince who ought to be so dear to all good Frenchmen becoming, as he thinks, an object of contempt and general exasperation. Fénelon's letters of this date throw a melancholy light on the decadence of public spirit, and the deterioration of characters and social morality. The young and rising generation, full of new desires, enduring impatiently the long reign and the mute subjection imposed by Louis XIV, ought, it seemed, to turn with favour to an heir more or less like themselves, who already announced such contrary maxims. Far from it: in place of that favour they showed only dislike against the future king, because they knew him to be virtuous and religious.

Vice and debauchery, muzzled at the close of Louis XIV's reign, feared to be still more so, and in another manner, under his grandson. Nevertheless, as much heedless want of reflection, much mere vogue and fashion, were, after our French custom, mingled with all this, it came to pass that during the last year, when the Duc de Bourgogne, then become dauphin by the death of his father, put himself, with little effort, into an attitude of pleasing and of winning good will, public opinion suddenly veered round to honour him and extol his transformation, so that when he died, a few months later, the loss was mourned as irreparable, as that of a blessing torn from the human race.

Saint-Simon shows us, visibly, the whole of this movement, the flux and reflux, in which he swims himself, and which is much less felt in the calmer and by no means enthusiastic Correspondence of Fénelon. During the whole year of 1710, and in the beginning of 1711, he never ceases, when touching that delicate chord, to make it ring the one sound: sustain, correct, enlarge the heart of the young prince; he desires, and demands of Heaven for him, "a heart as wide as Ocean." It is necessary that from that moment he should practise his royal rôle "by correcting himself, by taking much upon him, by adapting himself to men in order to know them, to manage them, and learn how to put them to work." In vain is he told good things of the prince, he will not be satisfied

“until he knows him free, firm, in possession of the power of speaking (even to the king) with gentle and respectful force. . . . If he does not feel the need of becoming firm and vigorous, he will never make any true progress; it is time now to be a man.”

Fénelon, who has been accused, and with reason, of being sometimes visionary, and who had a corner of poesy and idealism in his nature which, in his youth at least, he liked to transport into human things, guards himself from this tendency when he judges and exhorts the Duc de Bourgogne. He feels, with all his mind and all his nobility of nature, what are the qualities necessary for a king, for the head of a nation, for one of the masters of the world. He desires, therefore, to inspire his pupil with boldness of action, nobleness in his behaviour and bearing; the art of conversation, of all that adorns, imposes, and gives to power its gentleness and majesty. “Let him be small and ever smaller under the hand of God, but great and grand to the eyes of men. It is for him to make virtue joined to authority loved, feared, and respected. It is said of Solomon that men feared him, seeing the wisdom that was in him.” To the very end he distrusts and combats in his pupil what was in the latter an inveterate habit until he was twenty-eight years of age, namely, too much reasoning, too much speculation as opposed to action, and a certain petty and trivial compliance, both in serious matters and in his recreations: “Puerile amusements lower the mind,

weaken the heart, degrade the man, and are contrary to God's order." Fénelon, in the whole of this moral appeal, is not chary of his expressions.

In all that I have said, I have had no other intention than to recall certain traits of the noble, lofty, courageous piety, both social and royal, of Fénelon, without presuming to draw (which would be cruel and almost impious in regard to him) any inference, any consequence, against the future of his cherished pupil, against that future which it was not given to men to know or to see develop. The Duc de Bourgogne, disappearing in his first bloom, remains one of those confused and flattering hopes that all may construe and interpret as they choose. Have we not seen Saint-Simon admire him all the more because he had, as it were, grafted upon him and upon his future reign his own whole system of quasi-feudality?

Fénelon himself, like his pupil, was a hope; he appeared in politics as one of those floating lights that the breeze of public opinion sends vacillating from one side to the other, according as men take them and welcome them. His ideas and his various plans demand a long explanation, the last word and conclusion of which would be, as I think, doubt. That which is certain is that the true Fénelon, such as he shows himself in this correspondence, and in his last years, is not precisely the Fénelon whom the men of the eighteenth century—Ramsay, d'Alembert, and others—have successively presented to the public

and extolled. The Fénelon who, in 1711, seems to desire and pray for an Assembly of Notables, but who, at the same time, is wholly occupied in opposing Jansenism, even mitigated Jansenism, in refuting M. Habert, in making an excerpt of the true doctrine of St. Augustine: the Fénelon who declares that "the liberties of the Gallican Church are actual slavery," who fears laic power far more than spiritual and ultramontane power, and who dreads the danger of schism as much as the invasion of France—that Fénelon is certainly not the one whom the philosophers of the following century have fashioned and remodelled to suit them.

The long reign of Louis XIV had strained all energies and wearied, in the long run, all conditions of men and their souls. Towards its close, and in spite of conventional laudations, the faults of that régime were felt by all reflecting minds, and struck the eyes of all who knew how to see. And who would see and feel them more keenly than Fénelon? His policy was, above all, moral. It was what it must have been in a man of sensitive feeling, piety, and delicacy, who had seen the Court very closely, and had suffered from it, and now, at the end of a long reign, watched its disadvantages and ill results, its last abuses and its disasters. In his exile, and notwithstanding his remaining confidential intercourse with the Court, he was not fully informed of the state of things; he says himself, constantly, that the general state of affairs

has not been explained to him, and he is right; he judges only as the public judged, or, as he says, "by the scraps of government he sees on his frontier." But even so, and without needing further information, all men of sense, honest men, the Fénelons, the Vaubans, the Catinats, saw the defects, and sought, each on his own line, remedies in counteraction and in the reversal of that which was. All such projects of dismissed and exiled men, malcontents, or patriotic dreamers, are necessarily vague and somewhat chimerical when it comes to applying them. But there was then a general inspiration, a natural breath, as it were, diffusing itself through all classes of lofty minds or simply human minds, sensible and gentle. Each had his plan of correction for that government of Louis XIV, now nearing its end. Fénelon was merely the man most in sight; the most popular among the many makers and inventors of plans and programmes.

He never gave to his plans and programmes a final touch; he never proposed them as other than first ideas, to be sifted and moulded into practice. His great innovation was to think and to say, in face of the monarchical idolatry of Louis XIV, that "kings are made for subjects, not subjects for kings." By inculcating that maxim in the Duc de Bourgogne, engraving it, as it were, upon his heart, he did not think of any act of positive reform, still less of philosophy and democracy, as we should now say: he was merely going back to the religion of

Saint-Louis. However laudable such maxims may be, they leave out, almost entirely, the question of public policy, properly so-called. A policy truly novel, but so necessary after Louis XIV, required, in order to succeed in its application, all the correctives and all the precautions which, later, were lacking—for Louis XVI failed solely from having practised faithfully, but without art, this very maxim of the virtuous dauphin, his father, and of the Duc de Bourgogne, his grandfather.

Fénelon knew men, and appears not to have relied much upon either their goodness or their gratitude; he says so in more than one place to the Duc de Bourgogne, and with a singularly intense accent, showing that he had no illusions on that point: "When a man is destined to govern men, he must love them for the love of God, and not expect to be loved by them. . . ." I refer my readers to that whole passage, which it is painful to transcribe in its ugly truths. There are moments when Fénelon's experience brings him very near to bitterness; but in him bitterness stops short and soon softens; it never resembles the misanthropy of others. I find in one of his letters to Mme. de Montbérón, when he was nearing his fiftieth year, a very keen and circumstantial painting of the insipid, arid, disillusioned life he was leading: "As for me, I live in cold peace, obscure and languishing, without ennui, without pleasure, without thought of ever having any; without prospect of any future in this world;

amid an insipid and often thorny present. . . .” Such moments of aridity and disgust in Fénelon are described in terms which show that his weariness of soul did not resemble a vulgar ennui.

As he grew older, causes for sadness increased; he lost all his friends. The short year during which the Duc de Bourgogne shone, only to be extinguished, passed like a flash. Fénelon, courted once more for several months, then dropped again on the death of the duke, had full opportunity to revive his ideas of the vanity and baseness of the world. Yet, in the midst of it, his delicate, pure nature, blessed with unction, and adorned with grace divine, recovers itself and resumes the upper hand. I find a letter from him on the death of his best friend, the Abbé de Langeron: it is sad, it is charming, it is light-hearted. Fénelon believed without effort in all that is spiritual within us; his piety had wings.

As we advance in the Correspondence, in the letters near its end we perceive a gleam, as it were; we feel a something that resembles mirth. There is the same disgust of life, but with it I know not what of fellow-feeling that corrects it. He loses the Duc de Chevreuse; and he delights in keeping about him at Cambrai the grandchildren of his friends, the sons of the Duc de Chaulnes, and in surrounding himself with all that happy youth. He loses the Duc de Beauvilliers: “As for me, who have been deprived of seeing him for so many years,” he writes to the widowed

duchess, "I still talk to him, I still open my heart to him, I believe I meet him before God; and though I do mourn him bitterly, I cannot think that I have lost him. O what reality there is in that close intercourse! . . . A little while, and we shall mourn no longer. We die ourselves, and what we love is living, and dies not again." This presentiment, this involuntary sensation of a soul that approaches the end of its earthly way and is about to reach its goal, shows through all of Fénelon's last letters, and communicates itself by many a little sign of joy to the reader. These last letters have the effect upon me of the last days of a mild winter, beyond which I feel the springtime.

XIII.

Comte Antoine Hamilton.

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THE modern vice that has done, perhaps, the most harm in these latter days is the pompous “phrase,” the declamatory grand words that some writers play with, others take seriously, and which all the first who used them, even those who played with them, took seriously also. I do not mean that we are ill of that malady only, nor that it is not allied to many others; but I think that disease is one of the most contagious, the one more directly injurious of late years, and that it is doing a good work to endeavour to cure it. Whatever could contribute to bring back to us our first clearness of expression, to rid the French language and the French mind of pathos and emphasis, of the false colour and the false lyricism which mingles in everything, would be a true service rendered not only to taste but also to the public mind. To accustom ourselves to write as we speak and as we think, is not that to put ourselves in the way of thinking rightly? After all, great efforts are not needed in France to

return to that clearness, for it is not only good form among us, it constitutes the basis of our language and of the spirit of our nation: it was its tendency and evident quality for centuries, and in the midst of all that has since been done to change it we still find numerous and excellent specimens of it to-day.

I shall go farther and say that, whatever may be done, clearness is and always will be a prime necessity in a nation eager and hurried like ours; which needs to hear quickly, and has no patience to listen long; we are brought back to our original quality by our very defects.

Nevertheless, among the celebrated writers of our language, all are not equally fitted to give us the impression or show us the image of this perfect clearness. No doubt some examples of it are found in all ages, even among our classics; witness Philippe de Commines and Montaigne. In spite of the pedantry of false knowledge and the remains of barbarism, this tendency and particular turn of the French mind did not fail to come to the light, and original natures took the lead in it. But it was not until a certain period more equally enlightened, that this clearness became habitual and, we may say, universal among good writers, passing into common usage. That period is quite recent; I date it towards the close of the seventeenth century. It was not until the middle of that century that French prose, which had done its grammar with Vaugelas and its rhetoric under



COMTE ANTOINE HAMILTON.

From an old print.

Balzac, emancipated itself all of a sudden, and became the language of a perfectly polished man in Pascal. But what one man of genius then did, and what other superior minds trained to the world, such as La Rochefoucauld and Retz, practised also, it needed an interval of time to bring others to profit by, and for the coin with the new effigy to circulate.

La Bruyère marks distinctly the new era; he inaugurates a species of régime wholly modern, in which clearness of expression seeks to combine itself with the action of the mind. Besides La Bruyère, we find other examples less striking but, perhaps, more facile, more natural. Fénelon, in his non-theological writings, is the lightest and most graceful model of the kind. Certain distinguished women, with the tact they receive from nature, did not wait for La Bruyère's example to show their vivid and inimitable sense of the fit and the appropriate in language.

At the close of the seventeenth century, and during the first half of the eighteenth, there came a period by itself for purity and the easy flow of French prose. When the second half of the latter century came, when Jean-Jacques Rousseau appeared, it was enriched with loftier, more brilliant, and wholly novel features; our prose gained in the shading of impressions and descriptions, but declamation was then introduced; false enthusiasm, false sensibility, had their course. This "declamation," from which we suffer

still [1850], has taken many forms for nearly a century; it has had its renewals and changes of colour with each generation, but it dates in the first instance from Rousseau.

But however that may be, between La Bruyère or Fénelon and before the advent of Jean-Jacques, there came a calm, enlightened period of moderation, in which we find the language such as we speak it, or might speak it, and such as nothing has yet made ancient. "Our prose," says Lemontey, "stopped at the point where, being neither too curt nor too formal [*hachée ni périodique*] it became the most supple and elegant instrument of thought." We may certainly, as amateurs, prefer other epochs of prose than that; it would not be difficult to show moments when our prose took on more fulness and grandeur; but for habitual and general use I know none more perfect, more convenient, or better suited for intercourse, than the language of that date. For principal examples I take, at a first glance; Le Sage, the Abbé Prévost, Mme. de Staal (de Launay), Mme. du Deffand, Fontenelle, Vauvenargues, Montesquieu finally, and Voltaire, already in his variety and richness. I find also, at the very beginning, the incomparable writer of Memoirs, Saint-Simon, and a unique narrator, on whom I pause for a few words to-day—the very agreeable Hamilton.

Antoine Hamilton, one of the most Attic writers of our literature, was neither more nor less than an

Englishman of Scotch descent. We have seen other foreigners—Horace Walpole, the Abbé Galiani, Baron de Béseval, the Prince de Ligne—possess, or assume, the French spirit marvellously well; but Hamilton does so to a degree that allows no other element to be seen; he is that spirit, that wit itself. Educated from childhood in France, living afterwards at the semi-French Court of Charles II, at all times a pupil of Saint-Évremond and the Chevalier de Grammont, with a vein in him of the Cowleys, the Wallers, and the Rochesters, he was a cross between all that was most acute, refined, and witty in the two races. England, which had taken Saint-Évremond from France, restored him in the person of Hamilton, and it was full consolation. Louis XIV gave subsidies to Charles II, he gave him also a mistress: the emigration of James II returned both to Louis XIV, in the persons of a great warrior, Berwick, and (what is more rare) a charming writer, a light and airy chronicler of elegancies.

What is known of the life of Hamilton? Very little. He was born, they say, in 1646, in which case he would be a little younger than La Bruyère and a little older than Fénelon. In the flower of his age he was at that Court of Charles II which he describes to us so vividly; but the Hamiltons of whom he speaks were his brothers; personally, he gives himself no rôle. Whatever rôle he may have played, he was, first and last, an observer. Endowed with a keen sense of the

ridiculous, and a most penetrating social perception, he could distinguish the faintest shades and fix them with a light, ineffaceable stroke. He makes no difficulty in admitting that he gladly amused himself at the expense of those who deserved it. Returning to France on the Revolution of 1688, in the suite of his legitimate king, he lived there in the best society, compensating himself for the ennui of the pious little Court at Saint-Germain by visits to the Berwicks and the Grammonts. He made couplets in the style of Coulanges, and wrote letters to friends, mingling prose with verse, in the style of Chaulieu. He was intimate with the latter, and frequented the Vendômes and the society of the Temple. We find him in demand at Sceaux, where the Duchesse du Maine held Court of *bel esprit*. Dangeau wrote to him à propos of a letter of his to Berwick, which was thought to be full of delicate praises: "It is wholly in the style of the best-bred persons at Marly."

But this kind of vogue would only have led him to be appreciated by his friends and the societies he enlivened: it would not have procured him a distinct place and physiognomy among the chroniclers of that day. Speaking of the expedition of the Pretender in 1708, and of the seigneurs who took part in it, Saint-Simon mentions Hamilton confusedly: "The Hamiltons," he says, "were brothers of the Comtesse de Grammont; they were the leading lords of Scotland, brave, full of intelligence, and faithful. Through their

sister, they mingled much with the best company of our Court; they were poor, and had each their own little corner of singularity." Here then is our Hamilton confounded with the others of his family, and, for all distinctive mark, we are told that they had each "their own little corner of singularity!" And there he would still remain for us if, when already old, in his sixtieth year, he had not taken it into his head, in order to amuse his brother-in-law, the Comte de Grammont, then over eighty years old and still charming, to write down the latter's youthful adventures when Chevalier de Grammont; to make himself, in short, his Quintius Curtius and his Plutarch, in merriment.

This is the only work of Hamilton that is worth re-reading to-day; as for his verses and even his *Contes*, they need not be mentioned. His verses, praised, however, by Voltaire, praised even by Boileau (who must have grumbled as he wrote that polite letter), are entirely out of date for us, and almost unreadable; they are nothing but a string of rhymes in which, here and there, a happy thought flashes out. How is it that in witty works that have pleased good judges when born, there should be so much that decays with time and dies out? There is a Voiture in every man of wit who is nothing but that; I call by Voiture's name the wit of fashion that has but one season and which a breath wilts; there is much of Voiture in Hamilton's verses. Pure poesy is not to be looked for in him.

He has that of his day in sportiveness; he knows the right quantity for the French mind at that period: "Whatever its ornaments," he says, "in a lengthy narrative poesy is always wearisome." He likes Horace, but he seems not to know what Milton was. Shakespeare is to him as if he were not; though it seems as if the roguish Ariel disguised itself and, all unknown, glided into his prose.

His *Contes* might have something more, perhaps, of this Ariel fancy if they were less confused. He wrote them on a wager to amuse his sister, the Comtesse de Grammont, and in imitation of the "Arabian Nights"; they are full of allusions, the meaning of which escapes us. Still, through them all, something natural and piquant is felt. The Duc de Lévis, who believed he continued them, was merely insipid. If I wished to give an idea of them by some modern production I should name the pretty fantasy of Alfred de Musset's *Merle blanc*.

But the *Mémoires de Grammont*, they last; it is to them that the fairy has given all her grace. The manner seems made expressly to illustrate Voltaire's words: "Grace in expressing itself is worth more than what is said." The foundation is slender; not precisely frivolous, as persons have called it; it is not more frivolous (light and airy as it is) than all human comedy. There are many heavy treatises that are more frivolous, though without the appearance of it. The hero of the Memoirs is the Chevalier, afterwards

the Comte de Grammont, the man most in fashion in his day, the ideal of a French courtier at a period when the Court was all in all, the type of that airy, brilliant, supple, alert, indefatigable personage, repairing all faults and follies with a sword-thrust or a witty saying. Our century has seen some fine remains of the race in the Vicomte Alexandre de Ségur and Comte Louis de Narbonne. The characteristic of that light race was in never being false to themselves. Grammont, dangerously ill and urged to religion by Dangeau, sent for that purpose by the king, turned to his wife, who was very devout herself: "Countess," he said, "if you do not take care, Dangeau will filch my conversion from you." Which did not, however, prevent the conversion, in the end, from being sufficiently sincere.

But Grammont himself does not matter very much to us. Though the hero of Hamilton's narrative, he is often only its pretext. It is the manner of showing him that makes the charm. Envious folk (and Bussy was one of them), while granting to the Comte de Grammont a gallant and exquisite wit, added that the expressions of his face and his tones often "gave value to things he said that were nothing at all on the lips of others." Hamilton made good use of Bussy's remark by giving to Grammont his every accent, and perhaps by lending him some. Nothing can equal his manner of telling and narrating, easy, happy, uniting the trivial to the choice, with a perpetual yet

almost unconscious satire, an irony that glides and does not force itself, and a perfected art of disparaging. He says, somewhere, of the Duke of Buckingham, who was paying court to a beauty:

“She did not dislike backbiting; he was father and mother of it; he wrote ballads and invented old women’s tales, over which she went crazy. But his particular talent lay in catching the absurdities in people’s talk, and mimicking them in their presence without their perceiving it. In short, he could flay all kinds of personages with so much grace and charm that it was difficult to do without him when he chose to take the trouble to please.”

I think I catch in that portrait a reflection of Hamilton himself; but it is more especially when he paints his sister, the beautiful Miss Hamilton, who married Grammont; it is on that charming page, among so many others, that indications escape him which I trace back to himself, applying them not to his muse (solemn term that does not suit him), but to his grace as a writer:

“She had,” he says, “an open forehead, white and smooth, hair well-plaited and docile to the natural arrangement it costs such trouble to produce. A certain freshness that borrowed colours cannot imitate, formed her complexion. Her eyes were not large, but they were lively, and her glances signified all that she wished them to say; her mouth was full of charm, and the outline of her face was perfect. A delicate little turned-up nose was not the least ornament of a face that was very agreeable. . . . Her mind was a good deal like her face. It was not by aggressive vivacity, the sallies of which only stun and bewilder, that she sought to shine in conversation. She avoided still more that affected slowness of speech, the weight of which sends us to sleep; but, without being in haste to speak, *she said what it was necessary to say and no more.*”

That is how, in his perfect diction, he appears to me himself. Shall I add that in this very portrait of his sister his malicious¹ pen does not refrain from an insinuation on hidden beauties, which proves that, if need be, his indiscretion respects nothing. We have since had other Memoirs of courtiers and celebrated dandies. The Maréchal de Richelieu, that spoilt child of the eighteenth century and of Voltaire, that last type of the consummate courtier who took the place of the Comte de Grammont, also desired his historian. Soulavie edited from his notes volumes full of scandal and diverting adventures, more or less vulgar. The flower of the genus was not in them, it had been plucked already: I do not know if there was no other Comte de Grammont, but it is certain that there has been but one Hamilton.

Also there is but one age for certain fortunate works. That a gentle, polished mind, penetrating, shrewd, and refined, shedding upon surrounding things and on its neighbour a universal airy satire—that such a mind should be born into the world does

¹ It may be well to say here that *malicieux* is one of the many words identical in French and English which have not the same meaning in both languages. “Malicious” in English means harbouring enmity without cause; proceeding from extreme hatred or ill-will (Stormonth). *Malicieux* in French means inclination to do little mischievous things (*méchancetés*); little mischievous things done for pastime (Littré). We have no word or expression in English that translates, or can represent *malicieux*; “mischievous” is the nearest; but it is quite inadequate, and conveys neither the delicate humour nor the roguishness.—Tr.

not suffice. All things about that mind must be arranged to favour its possessor; the climate, as it were, must be prepared; in the midst of fools and vulgarians who, in all ages, swarm in the world and in the best society, a well-assorted company of choice minds must assemble apart, and be able to listen and reply to him, losing nothing if he speaks low, and asking from him no more and nothing else than he can say. In the second half of the eighteenth century the world, in this respect, changed; declamation obtained the upper hand, and a certain false keying-up became necessary. Minds like those of Hamilton would have been much less enjoyed; in fact, they must have forced the tone to be felt at all. At the pace the world is now going, will this species of rare minds be lost entirely? Not entirely, I think; but it will be less and less in view, and seen in a less good light.

Meantime, it is profitable to put ourselves back, now and then, into a liking for these facile writers, in whom there is nothing old or worn. "This work," says Voisenon, speaking of the *Mémoires de Grammont*, "is at the head of those we ought to re-read regularly every year." That is better advice than one might expect from Voisenon. Grace, I know, cannot be taught and is never learned; in fact, it would be knowing it to attempt to copy it. It is good, however, to talk of it sometimes, and circle round it; something of it always remains.

To analyse these Memoirs of Grammont would be

a thankless and stupid task, for it is manner and the method of expression that give them value; as for the narrative, after a certain moment, it goes pretty much as God pleases. The opening adventures are the most interesting and the most consecutive. The first loss at cards in Lyons with the horse-dealer, the revenge of the chevalier at the siege of Turin, the game with the Comte de Caméran at which, foreseeing he meant to cheat, de Grammont has himself secretly supported by a detachment of infantry—all these are scenes of pure comedy. We feel at once how ideas of morality have changed since then, when the historian, even in jest, could do honour to a hero so lacking in honesty. It is true that when Hamilton, at the close of Louis XIV's period, related the first exploits of his hero under Richelieu, he was speaking of another century and of things that were nearly fabulous. At any rate, the Abbé Prévost did not think he ruined his Chevalier Des-Grioux in the mind of the reader, by attributing the like peccadillos to him. We must conclude, therefore, that on this point of morality we have improved upon those times. The personages that Hamilton meets by the way and shows to us become instantly living. Who does not remember, if once he has seen them, the grotesque Cerise, the worthy governor Brinon, and, above all, Malta, the chevalier's second, Malta so natural, so heedless, so full of wit! He had no brains, says Retz, but Hamilton puts in action his naïve giddiness

and makes us love him. At Turin, gallantry begins; the beautiful ladies are mentioned by name; it is still another trait of manners and morals that these Memoirs could have appeared in the lifetime of Hamilton, with all these names and revelations, without causing an uproar. People were more easy-going in certain ways than they are now.

When his hero goes to the English Court the style of the historian changes a little; we enter a gallery of portraits and find a complication of adventures which, at first, we have some difficulty in disentangling. Unity ceases; we have alternately the recollections of Grammont and the recollections of Hamilton, which combine or cross each other. Still, with a little attention, we end by recognising where we are, at a Court ball, as it were, amid that bevy of English beauties, the most refined and the most aristocratic in the world, whose every charm the painter has rendered with discrimination. I have before my eyes the magnificent edition of the Memoirs published in London in 1792, with numerous engraved portraits; those beauties defile before me, the squadron of maids of honour to the queen and the Duchess of York; I read the opposite page, and I find that the writer with his pen is the greater painter.

“This lady,” he says of a Mrs. Wettenhall, “was what is properly called a wholly English beauty, kneaded of lilies and roses; snow and milk as to colours, made of wax in regard to hands and arms, throat and feet, but all without soul or air. Her face was of the prettiest, but it was always the same face: you might say she took

it from a case in the morning and put it back at night, without using it during the day. But how could she help it? Nature had made her a doll from childhood and doll to her death remained the white Wettenhall."

So of one, so of others, but among them no resemblance. Hamilton is not the Van Dyck of that Court; he has not the gravity of a great royal painter; but he is a painter apart, of his own kind, with his soft, shrewd, malicious brush. The roguish Ariel frolics through all this part of the Memoirs, and often takes delight in tangling the web. What mystifications, what madcap tales, what pretty episodes throughout this incessant imbroglio! What an ironical contrast between this life of youth and jollity and the final expiation at Saint Germain! The last page, which sums up in marriages these various whimsicalities of love and fortune, ends delightfully the charming tale, which was beginning to drag slightly.

The style, generally happy, natural, negligent, fastidious without being *précieux*, is not free, in two or three places, from an appearance of studied nicety and fine writing, which betokens the approach of the eighteenth century. In fact, Hamilton, may be said to begin the eighteenth century. Already he has the curt phrase of Voltaire. Bossuet has made a timely exit from the world just as Hamilton begins to write. He is one with La Fare, Sainte-Aulaire, Chaulieu, with that little group of choice volup-

tuaries who mark the transition between the two ages. He lays a finger, as it were, on the *Lettres Persanes*, published one year after his death. But, in the *Lettres Persanes*, jesting begins to attack grave things, and to take on a bitterness that Montesquieu afterwards regretted. Hamilton never jests, at any rate never with pen in hand, except on light matters: he scoffs in low tones only. He is one of the happy, lively spirits who brighten the opening of the new century before declamation began with Rousseau, and before the propaganda to which Voltaire set fire. Epicurean, perhaps, on many points, he at least had the prudence to feel that, to be at his ease, it was not desirable that all the world should be so too.

Hamilton died at Saint-Germain, April 21, 1720, in the seventy-fourth year of his age, with feelings of great piety, it was said, and after receiving the sacraments; in the matter of death he became once more the man of the seventeenth century. A few "Reflections" in verse show that he did really, like La Fontaine, have his day of sincere repentance. I find, among the *Anecdotes Littéraires* of the Abbé de Voisenon an incident relating to Hamilton which needs clearing up: "The Comte de Caylus," says the abbé, "who saw him often at his mother's house, assured me more than once that he was not amiable." Can it be that Hamilton was not amiable in society? in spite of all such assurances, could we ever believe it?

Hamilton, when the Comte de Caylus saw him at his mother's house, was an old man, wearied perhaps; moreover, we think of him as being, at all times, capricious, and rather unequal in moods, like his sister; he had that "corner of singularity" of which Saint-Simon tells us. He himself says, somewhere, that he knows when to hold his tongue, and that he did not much like talking. With his malicious causticity and the sly lip for which he was so well known, he needed silence around him; and, perhaps, when Caylus met him at his mother's house there may have been too much youth and tumult to suit him.

XIV.

The Princesse des Ursins.

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The Princesse des Ursins.

DURING the negotiations for the Peace of the Pyrenees, Mazarin, talking one day with the prime minister of Spain, Don Luis de Haro, spoke of the political women of the Fronde, the Duchesse de Longueville, the Duchesse de Chevreuse, and the Princess Palatine, as being each of them capable of overthrowing ten kingdoms:

“You are very lucky in Spain,” he added; “you have, as everywhere else, two sorts of women, coquettes in abundance, and very few good women; the former think only of pleasing their lovers, the latter their husbands; neither have any ambition but for luxury and vanity; they know only how to write, the one set their love-letters, the other their confessions: neither know what flour is made of, and their head swims if you talk to them on business. Our women, on the contrary, be they prudes or coquettes, old, young, silly or clever, want to meddle in everything. A well-behaved woman” (I allow the cardinal to use his own language) “would not sleep with her husband, nor a coquette with her lover, unless they talked to her during the day of State affairs; they want to see all, hear all, know all, and, what is worse, do all and tangle all. We have three among others, Mmes. de Longueville, de Chevreuse, and the Princess Palatine, who put us every day into more confusion than there ever was in Babylon.”

“Thanks be to God,” replied Don Luis, with little gallantry, “our women are what you say; provided they handle the money, whether

of their husbands or lovers, they are satisfied, and I am very glad they do not meddle in affairs of State; for if they did, they would assuredly spoil things in Spain as they do in France."

Those are harsh words on both sides, which would raise a terrible quarrel if fully discussed. It seems that the philosopher Condorcet did formally take upon himself to reply in a dissertation (inserted in the *Journal of the Society of '89*), in which he pleaded for the "admission of women to civic rights," adducing in support of their claims the great historical examples of Queen Elizabeth of England, the Empress Maria Theresa, and the two Empresses Catherine of Russia; and he adds, speaking of French women:

"Was not the Princesse des Ursins worth a little more than Chamillart? Is it thought that the Marquise du Châtelet could not write a better despatch than M. Rouillé? Would Mme. de Lambert have made such absurd and barbarous laws as those of Keeper of the Seals d'Armenonville against the Protestants, domestic thieves, smugglers, and negroes?"

The Princesse des Ursins herself treated the same question less solemnly and more agreeably in one of her letters to Mme. de Maintenon. The latter had written to her, complaining of the frivolity of the talk that reigned more than ever at the Court of Versailles: "Yes, madame," she writes, "the greatest difficulty lies in the little resources to be found in the men; they are nearly all selfish, envious, insincere, insensible to the public good; they consider all sentiments contrary to their own as romantic and impracticable." To which Mme. des Ursins replies:



PRINCESSE DES URSINS.
From an old print.

" You make me a portrait of most men, which is not much to their advantage; and what I think the worst of it is, that it seems to me rather natural. They return us the same; for if one is to believe them, we have most of their imperfections and few of their good qualities. Yet it is certain that they have contemptible pettinesses, and they tear each other to pieces even more than women do. . . . The knowledge that I have of the world attaches me still more to you; I find there all the virtues and the goodness that are lacking in others."

This is how, while complimenting each other, two political women talked of men in their tête-à-tête, and took their revenge on Don Luis de Haro and Mazarin.

But, in a letter dated soon after, the truth is perceptible; I catch a confession there which proves that revenge is never quite complete, even to the eyes of the heroines who indulge in it. The Queen of Spain, forced to quit Madrid at the approach of the enemy, was obliged to part with most of the ladies of her suite. Three hundred remained in Madrid, not caring to accompany her, though many, with a little good will, could have done so; and these ladies soon after left the palace to go, some to their homes, others to convents, in short, wherever inclination or interests took them. On the queen's return to the capital, finding them absent or dispersed, it was thought a good time to practise economy; soldiers were just then more needed than female attendants of doubtful fidelity. Mme. des Ursins proceeded to cut off at one stroke the three hundred ladies of the queen. We can imagine the outcry. Mme. de Maintenon,

however, writes to congratulate her: "As I never lose my interest in you, I am delighted that you have three hundred less women to govern." So she herself and Mme. de Maintenon thought three hundred women more difficult to rule than three hundred men—what more could we ask?

The Princesse des Ursins, who has led me to touch this delicate chord, was a woman in politics not, I think, of the first order, but very superior as such to Mme. de Maintenon. Having played in Spain an important rôle for thirteen years, interrupted only by a short dismissal, then abruptly thrown down, as if uprooted in the twinkling of an eye, without leaving behind her either partisans or minions, she has excited contradictory judgments, most of them severe. Short of being historians, we should have little chance of forming a close appreciation of her fame were it not that we possess nearly the whole of her correspondence with Mme. de Maintenon. It is through those letters that we are able to approach her closely, to enter her mind, and pronounce an opinion upon her with more esteem than has usually been given to her.

In spite of her name [Orsini] and her foreign rôle, Mme. des Ursins was wholly French, of the blood of the Trimouilles, and the daughter of M. de Noirmoutier, who was so mixed up in the intrigues of the Fronde, and so closely allied with Cardinal de Retz, whose *Memoirs* end with a complaint of his unfaithfulness. At the same time, Mlle. Anne-Marie

de La Trimouille, through her mother, was almost a *bourgeoise*—a *bourgeoise* of Paris. Her mother, Aubry by name, belonged to an old family of the robe and the finances. The exact date of the daughter's birth is not given, but it must have been about the year 1642. She married in 1659 her first husband, the Prince de Chalais, of the Talleyrand family. A duel having forced him to quit the kingdom, she followed him to Spain, then to Rome, where she became a widow. She was young, beautiful, with much intelligence, much worldly knowledge, grace, and the gift of language. She sought the protection of the French cardinals, more than one of whom was not insensible to her charms. Saint-Simon, who paints her to perfection in her first form, shows her to us again in the fulness of her beauty and the grandeur of her bearing, which she well knew how to maintain through all her vicissitudes:

“She was tall rather than short, with blue eyes that invariably said what it pleased her that they should say; with a perfect figure, a beautiful bust, and a face which, without beauty, was charming. Her air was extremely noble, with something majestic in her whole bearing, and graces so natural and so continual in all things, even the most insignificant, that I have never seen any one to compare with her in body or mind, of which latter she had a great deal and of all sorts: a flatterer, caressing, insinuating, cautious, wishing to please for the sake of pleasing, and gifted with charms from which it was impossible to defend oneself when she chose to reign and fascinate. And with it all, an air that, in spite of its grandeur, attracted rather than alarmed; a delightful gift of conversation, inexhaustible, and withal, very amusing from all she had seen and known of countries

and people ; a voice and manner of speaking very agreeable, with a gentle air ; she had read much, and she was a person of much reflection. A great choice of the best company, much practice in keeping it and even in holding a Court ; great politeness, yet with great distinction, and, above all, much care not to put herself forward except with dignity and discretion. She was, moreover, the person in the world best fitted for intrigue ; who had passed her life in it in Rome by her own choice ; much ambition, but a vast ambition far above that of her sex and of the ordinary ambition of men, and an equal desire to be and to govern. . . .”

I pause in the quotation of this portrait which the inexhaustible painter does not end so soon. Such was the Princesse des Ursins in Rome at the time she made her second marriage with Prince Orsini [called Ursins in French], Duc de Bracciano. Mme. des Ursins was at that time called Mme. de Bracciano when in Paris, where she sometimes went for long visits, giving little balls for marriageable heiresses, which always ended at ten o'clock in the evening. But her usual residence was Italy and chiefly in Rome. Becoming a widow for the second time, and without children, it seemed that her remarkable qualities, much appreciated by friends, were not likely to be exercised on a wider field than that of a brilliant society, when an unforeseen necessity occurred to bring her forward.

Louis XIV, in accepting the crown of Spain for his grandson, the Duc d'Anjou, married him to a princess of Savoie, sister to the Duchesse de Bourgogne, the wife of his brother. It was necessary to find a guide for the young queen (a child only thirteen years of age), an experienced adviser to form her, to train her

not to shock expectations around her, but to play her part with dignity. It was found that Mme. des Ursins alone united the difficult conditions of this post: she had lived in Spain, knew the language and the customs, and held the rank of grandee through her husband. The Cardinal of Porto-Carrero, who was the influencing personage in Spain, had formerly, when in Rome, been very much in love with her in common with many others. She knew intimately all the southern Courts and those who figured at them. It was therefore decided that no one was so fitted as Mme. des Ursins to fill the place of *Camerara mayor*, or Superintendent of the Household of the queen. Until then, her ambitions and her intrigues had been spent on accessory and secondary affairs. She now felt that the game was about to come into her own hands, but she carefully avoided seizing it too eagerly; in fact, she made herself entreated for what was really the object of her secret desire. She was not less than fifty-nine years old when this career opened to her (1701). Mme. de Coulanges, on hearing the news, while considering Mme. des Ursins very worthy of the office, thought that at her age nothing agreeable in life could be expected; this came of her being a woman only, incapable of conceiving in her sex other passions than those that were loving and tender. Mme. des Ursins, who added to those passions the ambitions of men, entered upon her new rôle with a zeal, an ardour, an activity that were more than virile.

Two distinct epochs are to be noted in her thirteen years of influence in Spain. From the first she charmed the young queen, a gracious and really intelligent pupil, became necessary to her, and, through her, became equally so to the young king, Philippe V a prince of upright mind, brave in war, but timid in character, with an imperious temperament, which made him blindly dependent on his wife (*uxorius*) in a word, chaste, devout, and amorous. During the three first years Mme. des Ursins worked to establish herself firmly in the minds of these two royal personages; she put aside all rival influences, foiled them by every means in her power, excited endless clamour and for want of enough discretion and prudence deserved to receive her recall by order of Louis XIV. In this first downfall she displayed qualities far more rare and more dextrous than any she would have shown under permanent good fortune. Like a good general who proves his skill in a retreat, she managed her own so well that she induced Louis XIV, instead of obliging her to go at once into exile in Italy, to see her and hear her at Marly and Versailles. There, on the ground, in person, she reconquered her influence, and at the same time she learned to understand better the line of policy she ought henceforth to follow.

Returning to Madrid all-powerful and upheld by authority, she reigned there, absolutely, in the interior of the palace, resolved in future to remain in perfect

accord with the Court and Cabinet of Versailles, at any rate until the day when that Cabinet should put itself in disaccord with the interests of Spain. It is from the date of her return that we have the series of her letters to Mme. de Maintenon, in which it is such pleasure to hear her and study her. It happens to us almost as it happened to Louis XIV; the moment that Mme. des Ursins succeeds in being heard, she recovers her place in our minds.

I must nevertheless say one thing on this first period (1701-1704) on which so many narratives have been written. Louville, one of the principal agents of French influence on Philippe V before the arrival of Mme. des Ursins, shows himself unjust and insulting towards her; he speaks of her, like an evicted rival, with all sorts of abuse, in Memoirs that were taken from his papers and published under his name. The Memoirs of Noailles, edited by the Abbé Millot, are more equitable. Without entering into the detail of intrigues, it is evident that Mme. des Ursins contributed, from the first, to guide the queen wisely and to lead her into a path where she made herself welcome to her new subjects and cherished by the Spanish people. The graces and the intelligence of that child-queen would not have sufficed without the direction of this constant guide, who became that of the young king also, in many ways. With the delightfully jesting tone peculiar to her, Mme. des Ursins is very amusing to listen to on this topic:

"In what an office, good God! have you put me!" she writes to the Maréchale de Noailles. "I have not a moment to rest, not even time to speak to my secretary. It is no longer a matter of reposing after dinner, or of eating when I am hungry; I am only too happy if I can snatch a bad meal at odd moments, and then it is very rare that I am not called off the moment that I sit down to table. Mme. de Maintenon would laugh if she knew all the details of my office. Tell her, I entreat you, that it is I who have the honour to take the dressing-gown of the King of Spain when he gets into bed, and give him his slippers when he gets up. To that point I have patience; but every evening when the king enters the queen's chamber to go to bed, the Comte de Benevento (grand chamberlain) puts into my arms his Majesty's sword, a chamber-pot, and a lamp, which I usually spill upon my clothes—it is too grotesque. Never would the king get up if I did not open his curtains, and it would be sacrilege if any one but I entered the queen's room when they are in bed. Lately the lamp went out, because I had spilt half of it; I did not know where the windows were, because we had arrived at that place in the night; I came near breaking my nose against the wall, and we were nearly a quarter of an hour, the King of Spain and I, stumbling against each other, trying to find them. Her Majesty is so pleased with me that she sometimes has the goodness to send for me two hours before I want to get up. The queen enters into all these jokes; but I have not yet secured the confidence she gave to the Piedmontese waiting-women. I am astonished at that, for I am much better than they; I am sure they never washed her feet or took off her shoes and stockings as neatly as I do."

She had to pass through these domestic cares in order to reach affairs of State and bring the young couple to do so likewise. During the campaign in Italy, which Philippe V insisted on making in person, Mme. des Ursins, according to the duties and prerogatives of her office, never left the young queen for a single instant. She was with her at the sessions of the Junta, and, under pretext of initiating her in public affairs, she herself obtained their secrets. She knew

how to make use of etiquette, to put it forward, or modify it, or loosen it altogether, according to her interests. She comprehended the sort of concessions demanded by the spirit of the Spanish people and what reforms it would permit. She judged the minds of the grandees at first sight, and was under no illusions as to the degree of support she might expect from them. "With those people," she writes to M. de Torcy, "the safest way is to show firmness. The more I see them closely, the less I find that they deserve the esteem I once thought no one could refuse them." According to her, the Spanish nation, in the person of its grandees, had given itself to a son of France solely from the belief that France alone could protect and defend it. France remaining victorious and powerful, Spain was safe; but after each defeat in Germany or Flanders, the eyes of the grandees turned back to the archduke, and their fidelity did not hold good.

The merit and the art of Mme. des Ursins were to know, in so short a time, how to turn to good account the favours and affability of the queen, and thus render her truly popular among the real Spanish people in the centre of the kingdom; it was a miracle to see how the roots of this new royalty struck into the hearts of the old Castilians so that it resisted the storms of many tumultuous years. The exact situation was this: the queen ruled the king; for in spite of the counsels that surrounded him, in spite of the

admirable instructions of Louis XIV, "the force, the impulse that decides men were not in him; he had received from heaven a subaltern and even subjugated spirit." Now the queen who, in 1704, had just completed her fourteenth year, needed a person to rule and govern her, "and give her good advice and courage." Mme. des Ursins was essentially that person. Did she always use this private and uncontrolled influence in a purely devoted and disinterested way? It would be rash to affirm that she did. Louville, her rival and enemy, a man of talent and ardour, but full of passion, presents her to us as the wickedest woman on earth, who ought to be driven out instantly: "so sordid and thieving that it is a marvel." He brings the same accusation against Orry, an able man whom Louis XIV had sent into Spain to put some order into the finances. These accusations do not seem to me warranted. Maréchal de Berwick, who held himself above all such odious bickerings, does more justice to Orry, and gives the impartial reader reason to think that Mme. des Ursins was still cleaner in this respect, and that she felt, as she herself said, "very easy and free in carriage." "I am a beggar, it is true," she writes to Mme. de Noailles after her arrival in Spain, "but still more am I proud." Recounting later to Mme. de Maintenon the indignities of that kind charged against both of them, she speaks in a tone of lofty irony and sovereign contempt which seems to exclude all pretence.

But what seems certain, though rather strange at first sight, is that Mme. des Ursins at over sixty years of age still had lovers. "She has morals on a see-saw," wrote Louville to the Duc and Duchesse de Beauvilliers. The Sieur d'Aubigny, a sort of steward of whom she made an equerry, occupied in the *Retiro* an apartment adjoining that of the princess, at the window of which he was seen one day to brush his teeth. "He was a tall, handsome fellow, very well made and free and agile in body and mind," not at all the "brute beast" that Louville describes him. But he was bold and rather insolent, as one who felt his rights. One day when Louville entered, with the Duc de Medina-Coeli, Mme. des Ursins's apartment, where she took them to converse more freely, d'Aubigny, who was installed at one end, seeing only the princess, and thinking her alone, apostrophised her in terms of brusque familiarity of the crudest kind, which put them all into confusion. Mme. des Ursins's feminine defect was on this side: "gallantry and devotion to her person was her ruling weakness, surviving everything else to final old age." It is Saint-Simon who says it, and he does her ample justice for her lively and lofty qualities.

This d'Aubigny has been mentioned as the principal cause of Mme. des Ursins's first downfall. After having caused the dismissal of Cardinal d'Estrées, whose place was filled by his nephew, the Abbé d'Estrées, Mme. des Ursins discovered that the latter, contrary

to agreement, was writing despatches to the Court of France without her knowledge. She intercepted one of these despatches and there read the particulars of her relations to d'Aubigny; but what piqued her most was a final remark of the ambassador that many persons thought them married. The great lady rose to her full height, and in her wrathful indignation wrote on the margin of the despatch: "As for marriage, no!" This, at least, is the story that circulated. The despatch thus commented upon went to the courier, and must have reached Louis XIV.

But the letters that we have of the king show that this extreme piece of folly was not needed to turn him against Mme. des Ursins. The complaints against her were at that time universal, certainly at Versailles, and at a distance it was difficult to distinguish those which had foundation from those which had none. Judging from what we know of Louis XIV's mind, he must have thought it an amazing thing that such importance should be given at the Spanish Court to a woman whom he had placed there to serve him. Finding resistance in his grandson and the young queen to Mme. des Ursins's recall, he wrote to them in the tone of a father and a king:

"You ask my counsel," he says to Philippe V, "and I write you what I think; but the best counsels become useless when persons wait to ask them and follow them until after the harm has happened. . . . Up to this time you have given your confidence to incapable or self-interested persons. . . ." (Speaking of the recall of Orry and another agent.) "It seems that the interest of those particular men fills

your mind altogether, and while it ought to be occupied only with great views, you lower it to the cabals of the Princesse des Ursins, with which I am incessantly wearied."

And to the queen Louis XIV writes more explicitly still:

"You know how I have desired that you should give your confidence to the Princesse des Ursins, and that I neglected nothing to induce you to do so. And yet, forgetting our common interests, she has given herself up wholly to an enmity of which I was ignorant, and has thought only of thwarting those who have been charged to conduct our affairs. If she had had a faithful attachment to you she would have sacrificed her resentment, well or ill-founded, against Cardinal d'Estrées, instead of making you take part in it. Persons like ourselves ought to hold themselves above the quarrels of private persons, and conduct themselves in accordance with their own interests and those of their subjects, which are one and the same. It was necessary, therefore, to either recall my ambassador and abandon you to the Princesse des Ursins, leaving her to govern your kingdom, or to recal her, herself. The last is what I have thought it my duty to do."

In these words so firm and so royal, we see plainly the true cause of Louis XIV's displeasure; and Mme. des Ursins's marginal note, true or false, is only a secondary matter.

The great king thought he ought to take extreme precautions to strike a blow at the right time. He chose a moment when the King of Spain was with the army and separated from the queen, fearing that the latter in her despair would throw obstacles in the way of its execution.

I send to the fourth volume of Saint-Simon all those who would admire the presence of mind with which

Mme. des Ursins, thus suddenly recalled as if by a thunder-bolt, did not allow herself to be disconcerted, the tranquillity of her demeanour, the art with which she managed her retreat slowly, in good order, yielding the ground foot by foot, without affecting to disobey, but taking measures to provide for her return. After a first stoppage at Toulouse, from which place she continued to correspond with her royal pupil, and where she succeeded in warding off the exile to Italy, she received the much-desired order to go to Versailles, and from that moment she no longer doubted her final success and triumph.

Arriving in Paris January 4, 1705, visited immediately by all persons of consequence, she went, eight days later, to Versailles, and after her first interview with Louis XIV, it was evident from the way he treated her that she was no longer an accused person, coming to render account of her conduct, but a conqueror who had got the better of her enemies. We see her loaded with favours and marks of distinction, "such as no subject ever had before"; and on one of the trips to Marly, Louis XIV did her the honours as if she were "a lesser foreign queen." At the Marly balls she was easy, dignified, unconstrained, turning her eyeglass on every one; at one of the balls she carried a little spaniel in her arms as if she were in her own house, and (what was still more remarked upon) Louis XIV caressed the dog several times, when he returned to converse with her, which he did nearly

all the evening. "Never was any one seen to soar so high."

Mme. des Ursins, who had imagination and was a little subject, we are told, to being dazzled, may have been, during these months of favour, slightly intoxicated; but it is certain that while she displayed all the charms of her continual and inexhaustible conversation, she keenly appreciated the mind of the king. She returns, in her subsequent letters, too frequently to the subject, and enters too particularly into what she discovered in him, not to make us feel on her part a sincerity deeper than flattery. She never speaks of the king except as "the most amiable man in the world," the "best friend," the "most courteous of men." Some have even gone so far as to suppose that Mme. des Ursins's views went farther, and that "the age and health of Mme. de Maintenon tempted her." She may have asked herself whether the prospect of taking her place in France were not better than what she would find in Spain. But these are conjectures too easy to make about the heart of a woman and quite impossible to verify.

What seems to me certain is that, independently of public affairs, she obtained a personal triumph of mind. Mme. de Maintenon, Mme. des Ursins, and Louis XIV were for some time under one and the same charm: "I often recall the idea of you and of your amiable presence that charmed me so at Marly," writes Mme. de Maintenon a year later; "do you still

retain the tranquillity that enabled you to go from most important conversations with the king to the foolery of Mme. d'Heudicourt in my cabinet?" Mme. des Ursins, who was there as a bird of passage, delighted in pleasing, and the sense of success redoubled her charm. Louis XIV was fascinated both by her grace and her capacity. He had expected to find her a belated woman of the Fronde; instead of which, he found one who by nature was fitted to be a person of authority and government, but who, for all that, did not cease to be a woman of delightful social art and with the grandest air. With her as a third, intercourse with Mme. de Maintenon became rejuvenated. Of the three personages, if I may venture to say it, Mme. des Ursins was the one who was most in command of her situation, who had considered all points of it intelligently; she was the one of the trio most aloof from her rôle, and, consequently, she played it best.

Once re-established in Spain, Mme. des Ursins, now in unison with Louis XIV, followed a more cautious, regular, and really irreproachable course towards those who had sent her there. The letters that she writes to Mme. de Maintenon, which began immediately after her departure from Paris, if they do not show us to the full her vigour and brilliancy, at least allow us to divine them; and they give us, unmistakably, the principal lines of her character. The mind of Mme. des Ursins was a serious mind, practi-

cal, a little cold and dry at bottom, but frank, resolute, and bold. Unlike Mme. de Maintenon, she had political ideas; she dared to avow them and push them to execution. She commits herself, before all else, to the complete re-establishment of the authority of the King of Spain. À propos of a claim set up by the *grandeės* against the captains of the guard, she wishes to see the whole cabal of the nobles (who are profiting by the weakness of the new régime to create titles and prerogatives for themselves) broken up; otherwise Spain was likely to fall into the same difficulties France was in before the Fronde, "in the days when Frenchmen did nothing but thwart one another." She is of opinion that the leaders of that party ought to be made to feel the displeasure of the king before any word can be received from France; so that it may appear to be a resolution taken by the King of Spain, and not suggested from abroad.

"Do not feel alarmed, I entreat you, madame, at these resolutions," she writes to Mme. de Maintenon; "it is fortunate that the *grandeės* have given us so good an occasion to humiliate them. They are proud men without force or courage; they are working to annihilate the authority of their king; I am furiously angry with them for all they have done since they entered the Council."

This virile tone carries us far away from Mme. de Maintenon. A thing more important, in Mme. des Ursins's opinion, than satisfying the *grandeės* is to have troops and find means to pay them, after which "we can laugh at the rest." "Would to God," she

exclaims, "that it was as easy to get the upper hand of the priests and the monks, who are the cause of all the revolts that you hear of!"

She has ideas on war (I do not say they are the best, but she has them), on plans of defence, and on the choice of generals; she states them all, excusing herself from arguing upon them, but she argues all the same. She sees dangers in advance, lays them bare, and spreads them out, without allowing herself to be discouraged. She shows the Spanish troops such as they are, the important fortresses destitute of everything, "according to the custom of Spain"; she demands energetically from France succour, men, and, after vehemently asking in the body of the letter for big battalions, she adds in a postscript that she has advised the King of Spain to order prayers. She has little flatteries of this kind suited to Mme. de Maintenon.

A few days after the arrival of Maréchal de Berwick, in writing to thank Mme. de Maintenon for that succour, she speaks of Saint-Cyr, knowing that nothing would please her so much, and well aware of the "weakness of mothers":

"The queen likes your 'Rules' for Saint-Cyr very much; our ladies wish to have them, and I am having them translated into Spanish to give them that satisfaction. If her Majesty were not bound by very different engagements than those of your young ladies of Saint-Cyr, I really believe she would wish to be one of your pupils."

The flattering creature knows how to say just the

proper thing, but there are days when, displeased to feel that Spain is being neglected and abandoned by Versailles, she is frank to rudeness.

One of her finest letters is addressed to M. de Torcy, the minister. Going back to the principle of the Spanish Succession, Mme. des Ursins shows what basis should be made of the fidelity, so recent in date, of the Spanish nation to the House of Bourbon, and what was the true political lesson of it; towards the grandees, to prevent the division of the monarchy; towards the people of the provinces, to sell their wool. Those who desire these advantages from France will, she thinks, decide to get them with the archduke, if France does not provide them. She ends by submitting her views as to the means of defending Spain as soon as possible from an impending invasion from Portugal, and also from Catalonia. Then, after having said all that she had in her heart, and saying it boldly, she effaces herself in a skilful postscript and re-enters her feminine rôle of lofty propriety.

The dangers that she foresaw were realised in the campaign of 1706; the Court was reduced to leave Madrid, which the Portuguese threatened and Berwick was unable to protect. The miseries and incidents of the journey across the still faithful provinces are related by Mme. des Ursins in a playful tone. She contents herself with cheering those about her, consoling them, inspiring firmness and a sort of joy; not

seeing things "in black," but obeying her easy humour and a certain inclination to hope that came to her by nature:

"It often happens, madame," she writes to Mme. de Maintenon, "that when we think all is lost, some fortunate event occurs to change the whole face of things. . . . I turn the medal, and expect consolations that will soften our troubles. I would, madame, that you could do the same, and that your temperament were your best friend, as mine is the one on which I can best rely. . . ."

Mme. de Maintenon, who, in spite of her excellent mind, was for ever tormenting herself and lamenting, was constantly praising her for a natural tranquillity that she envied, for her courage mingled with good humour, and for "the fine blood that left nothing sour or gloomy in her." It was, in truth, an original and most distinctive trait in Mme. des Ursins's character that she was a person so tranquil fundamentally beneath a form so active, and through a life so agitated. It was to this that she owed, after her great fall at seventy-two years of age, the ability to rise again and die in peace at the age of eighty. But there are still other traits in her nature that put her in perfect contrast to her friend, Mme. de Maintenon.

When we read the letters of Mme. des Ursins with those of Mme. de Maintenon that reply to them, the natures of the two women come out in a contrast that they themselves are the first to feel and to indicate. Mme. de Maintenon affects to appear less than she is; she likes to let more be divined than she shows; she slips aside, seems to shun notice, makes herself small

and modest, going so far as to say that she does not know how to deal with great people. Mme. des Ursins, on the contrary, very willingly puts herself forward, and brings all her person into play. We feel at times that she exceeds her limits as superintendent of the royal interior, for she does not fear to seem to step beyond them, and let something be seen of the political authority, the mainspring of which she holds in her hand. She likes both to be, and to appear to be. Their ideal of the future is different and marks the opposition of their natures, although ambition may not be less in the one than in the other. Mme. de Maintenon, sated and weary, aspires only to shut herself up at Saint-Cyr, as an impenetrable refuge; communicating only with timid and submissive young girls, resting the greater part of the day, wrapped in veils and hidden behind curtains. The greatest act of her queenship that she clings to performing is to seem to abdicate. Mme. des Ursins, always in the spirit and the enjoyment of public appearance and power, dreams, for her last retreat, of a tiny State of which she should be the independent sovereign; where she could, in her leisure hours, govern at last in her own name, and display herself in the sunlight—that was her *pot-au-lait*, her true castle in Spain. Of the two ambitions, the one that played the modest was really the wiser; the other seems more sincere: but, after all, these were only two different manners of playing queen when they were not queens.

The most agreeable part of this Correspondence is that which precedes and follows the victory of Almanza. That victory, gained almost in spite of himself, by Maréchal de Berwick, April 17, 1707, restored for a long time the affairs of Philippe V, who thus reconquered his capital and a good part of his kingdom. The letters of Mme. des Ursins, even during the flight and the disasters, breathe courage and hope; but from that moment of victory they take a marked tone of gaiety and brilliant raillery, which shows her to us at her best.

The account of the joy caused at Marly by the news of the victory of Almanza is in itself a living picture. France was beginning to feel unused to victories. The preceding year had seen the deplorable and disastrous day of Ramillies; reverses alone seemed to be expected. Suddenly, on the side where it was least expected, the news of victory arrives. Mme. de Maintenon relates to Mme. des Ursins the first effect produced:

“You know Marly and my apartment; the king was alone in my chamber, and I had just sat down to table in my salon, through which every one passes; an officer of the guards cried out at the door of the room where the king was: ‘Here is M. de Chamillart!’ [Minister of war.] The king answered, ‘What! himself?’ because, naturally, he was not expected. I threw down my napkin, quite agitated; M. de Chamillart said to me, ‘It is good!’ and entered where the king was, followed by M. de Silly, whom I did not know; you can believe, Madame, that I entered, too; I then heard of the defeat of the enemy’s army, and returned to my supper in high good humour.”

This little scene, very well related by Mme. de

Maintenon (I have slightly abridged it), struck the excited imagination of Mme. des Ursins, and brought back an echo that makes it more vivid still:

“All that you represent to me, madame, from the officers of the guards entering to announce the coming of M. de Chamillart, while you were supping in your salon, till the king went to the door himself with this great news, seems to me so natural that I think I see you flinging down your napkin and running to hear what was told; Mme. Dangeau flying to write to her husband; Mme. d’Heudicourt walking about as if she had good legs but not knowing where she was going; M. de Marsan jumping on a chair, in spite of his gout, with as much ease as if he had been a rope-dancer. As for Monseigneur the Duc de Bourgogne who is, I think, a little subject to absent-mindedness, I am surprised that in the first moments of his joy he did not take some lady for a billiard-ball and give her a stroke with the cue that he held in his hand.”

All this part of the Correspondence shows these two celebrated women much to their advantage, in all the vivacity of their mutual interests and in full accord. Mme. de Maintenon, with her usual preciseness, adds to this impression when she replies:

“I have just reread your letters to see if I have replied to everything. *Mon Dieu!* Madame, how content you are, and how playfully you jest! There is never any blackness in what you say, but now there is a joy that gives me all the joy of which I am capable. To render it complete we must have peace, but on conditions that will satisfy us.”

I remark, in passing, the little sentence: “There is never any blackness in what you say”—meaning sadness for blackness.

This peace, of which the timid and sensible Mme. de Maintenon writes incessantly, became in the

following years a stumbling-block in her intercourse with Mme. des Ursins, who is much less eager for it, and does not wish it at all except on the best conditions for Spain. Here again we see the differences in the natures of the two women defining themselves clearly. Mme. des Ursins hopes, even in extremity; she is not of those who abdicate easily. The King and Queen of Spain, to whom she had devoted herself, have lofty sentiments, "as lofty as the rank in which God has placed them; they are incapable of base acts. They have resolved to lose life itself rather than do aught that is unworthy of what they are" — that is to say, they will defend their crown, fighting until death, and she is incapable of giving them any other advice. But the moment comes when France despairs; when the ministry, especially, inclines to peace at any price; when Mme. de Maintenon, overwhelmed with anxiety, preaches or insinuates the same. The consequence of this discouragement would be the abandonment of the crown of Spain, and almost the dethronement of Philippe V by his grandfather, if Louis XIV consented to it. At that idea Mme. des Ursins rebels, her courage rises, all her blood boils; she writes letters of "fire and blood" to Mme. de Maintenon, turns for support to the Spanish nation, and, aided by the noble queen, flings the king resolutely into the arms of his subjects. This is her finest moment—the moment when her generosity, her proud soul, her courage, and the resources of her

mind display themselves to great advantage, and turn to the public good as much as to her honour. The correspondence with Mme. de Maintenon changes from this moment; sharp and bitter irony comes to the surface.

The war of the Spanish Succession, which ambition on the part of France began, and which ambition on the other side continued, was of a nature which, up to that time and for many previous centuries, was considered extraordinary and stupendous, whether from the military or the historic point of view. A great contemporaneous mind and actor in those memorable scenes, Bolingbroke, said of it: "The battles, the sieges, the surprising revolutions that took place in the course of this war, were of a kind the like of which cannot be found in any period of the same length." However that may be, it was certainly permissible in those days of disaster to differ in opinion as to the remedy and the means of coming out of such overwhelming evils. Mme. de Maintenon longed for escape like a woman, and like too many of the men of that day; like a woman of feeling, who sees the evil very closely, who suffers from it in herself and for others to whom she is attached, who has nothing of the heroine in her, who is wholly resigned and Christian, seeing the hand of God not only in repeated defeats and reverses, but even more directly in the natural scourges that fell upon France, such as the winter of 1709 (the severity of which had not been

known for more than a century), and in the famine that followed it, Mme. de Maintenon, in view of such evils, bows her head, kneels down, and—provided repose and relief from this excessive suffering come—does not recoil before any necessity:

“We can no longer make war,” she writes to Mme. des Ursins: “we must bow our heads beneath the hand of God when he wills to overthrow kings and kingdoms. That, Madame, is what I have always feared. . . . We have experienced a succession of misfortunes such as France cannot recover from except by a long peace; and famine, the worst evil of all, has driven us to our last straits. I own that all my fears never went so far as to foresee that we should be reduced to desire to see the King and Queen of Spain dethroned; there are no words, Madame, in which to express such sorrow; the King is filled with it.”

The word “dethroned” is uttered! She may afterwards have wished to retract it, but Mme. des Ursins refers to it perpetually, and never forgave it.

Mme. des Ursins, who is of a wholly different race, nurses and expresses very contrary opinions. She has always believed that the resources were greater than people said, if only the men were not so discouraged; she cannot understand those generals (Tessé, for example) who distrusted themselves, and who always had an air of expecting to advance to defeat. She is of opinion that “nothing can be done unless it is undertaken.” She fastens to Villars and seems to divine that the man whom everybody called mad was destined to be their saviour: “For,” she says, “there are too many wise men, or at least too many

who think they are when they risk nothing. I am persuaded that one must sometimes let risks be run, provided they are not pushed to temerity; that belongs only to heroes of romance." This last defect, she feels, is that of Villars, but she pardons it in him, even in the midst of the national humiliation: "Maréchal de Villars talks and acts," she says, "like those heroes of romance who think they carry victory wherever they go; I would like to have such airs here now, so opposed to those who are dashing us over the precipice."

The whole Correspondence of Mme. des Ursins during that fatal year of 1709 redounds to the honour of her generosity and the loftiness of her soul, as well as to her perspicacity of judgment; for, at the last, events proved her right; the throne of the Bourbons in Spain remained erect without causing that of Louis XIV of France to be much lowered.

A gap occurs in the correspondence of the two women at the moment when it cools and grows bitter. Mme. des Ursins requested one day that her letters be burned, and Mme. de Maintenon, to obey her, seems to have burned a part of them. Those lost letters, very curious for history, must have been less regrettable for charm and interest. Mme. des Ursins makes us share her feelings and carries us with her without difficulty, so much does her resistance to the peace seem a direct inspiration, a cry of patriotism and honour; we not only pardon her obstinacy, we admire

it. But, so soon as we suspect a personal ambition and cupidity, the impression becomes quite the contrary, and her noble part is injured in our eyes. It is certain that towards the end of this bloody period, and during the slow negotiations that closed it, she did all she could to obtain from the contracting powers a sovereignty of her own in the Low Countries. The King of Spain held firmly to that condition, so indecorous and so disproportioned to the great interests involved; he refused to sign the peace with Holland unless the Dutch not only placed Mme. des Ursins in possession of that sovereignty, but agreed to guarantee it to her against the Emperor. This is the most serious blame that can be laid upon the memory of Mme. des Ursins; a fault of conduct through vanity. She deserved that Bolingbroke, who knew her weakness and what could be obtained from her by giving her the title of Highness, should remark, during the negotiations of that period: "There is a real advantage for us in flattering the pride of that old woman, inasmuch as we have not the means of gratifying her avarice." This affair of the sovereignty completed the rupture between herself and Mme. de Maintenon. The sound and judicious mind of the latter recovers all its advantages here; her modesty would never have conceived an ambition so out of all proportion, her sense of fitness would never have allowed her to commit such a blunder.

The catastrophe that hurled Mme. des Ursins from

her high position remains one of the most singular, most dramatic, and most unexplained events in history. We know that the charming queen to whom she belonged, having died at the age of twenty-six, Philippe V instantly desired to remarry. Mme. des Ursins took possession of him, kept him under a species of humiliating subjection, and chose for him, intentionally, the least important of the princesses of Europe, with the express intention of creating her as if by her own hands, and forming her to her own interests.

Elisabeth Farnese, Princess of Parma, the object of this choice, and chosen only because Mme. des Ursins little knew her, arrived in Spain. The king advanced to meet her on the road to Burgos, and Mme. des Ursins herself went on from there to the little town of Xadraque. When the new queen arrived there, Mme. des Ursins received her with the customary formalities. Then, having followed her into her apartment, she became aware that the queen's tone instantly changed. Some say that Mme. des Ursins, having taken exception to a part of the queen's dress or coiffure, the latter treated her as an impertinent servant and became very angry. Others relate (and these different accounts supplement one another without actually conflicting) that Mme. des Ursins, having protested her devotion to the new queen, and assured her Majesty "that she might count on finding her always on her side with the king, to maintain

things as they should be in regard to her and to procure for her all the satisfactions that her Majesty had a right to expect, the queen, having listened quietly until then, took fire at these last words, and replied that she needed no one between herself and the king, that it was impertinent to make her such offers and to dare to speak to her in that manner." What is certain is that the queen, dismissing Mme. des Ursins with contumely out of her apartment, sent for M. Amezaga, lieutenant of the body-guard, who commanded her escort of honour, and ordered him to arrest Mme. des Ursins, put her instantly into a carriage, and take her to the frontier of France by the shortest route and without making any stop by the way. As M. Amezaga hesitated, the queen asked him if he did not have a special order from the King of Spain to obey her in everything without reservation; and it was true that he had it.

Mme. des Ursins was therefore arrested, and taken off instantly by six horses across Spain, still in her Court dress. It was then midwinter and she was over seventy-two years of age. A waiting-woman, and two officers of the guard were put in the carriage with her.

"I know not how I have borne up under the fatigues of this journey," she writes to Mme. de Maintenon eighteen days after the scene at Xadraque. "I was made to sleep on straw, and to fast in a way very different from the meals I am accustomed to. I did not forget to mention in the details I took the liberty of writing to the King (Louis XIV) that all I ate was two stale eggs a day; I thought that circum-

stance would excite him to have pity on a faithful subject who has in no way deserved, it seems to me, such contempt. I am going to Saint-Jean-de-Luz to rest awhile and hear what it pleases the king shall become of me."

From the latter town she writes again, still to Mme. de Maintenon:

"I shall await the orders of the king here at Saint-Jean-de-Luz, where I am living in a little house near the sea. I see it often agitated, sometimes calm: such is the life of Courts; that is what I have known; that is what has happened to me; that is what excites your generous compassion. I readily agree with you that we can find no stability except in God. Certainly none can be found in the human heart, for who was more sure than I of the heart of the King of Spain?"

Everything combines to show that it was the King of Spain himself who, forgetting the long services of Mme. des Ursins and weary of her rule, from which he dared not free himself, gave the order to his new wife to take the dismissal on herself; and she, who, as well as Alberoni, her adviser, was of the race of intrepid gamblers in politics, did not hesitate a moment in making for her first essay this masterful stroke. Elisabeth Farnese felt herself too strong a personage to exist beside Mme. des Ursins on the same stage.

This was the same Elisabeth, born to reign, of whom the great Frederick said: "The pride of a Spartan, English obstinacy, Italian shyness, and French vivacity made up the character of that singular woman; she marched audaciously to the accomplishment of her designs; nothing took her unawares, nothing stopped her." Being of that character, it is not surprising that

she took advantage of the opportunity offered her to make a clean sweep on her first arrival.

Under this terrible fall, Mme. des Ursins, the first shock over, recovered all her force, all her self-possession, and her apparent composure; not a complaint, not a reproach came from her lips, nor a word of weakness. She had long rendered account to her own mind of the nothingness of human life; she told herself, seeing her enemies triumphant and her friends in consternation, that there was nothing to be surprised at; that the world was but a comedy in which the actors were often very bad; that she had played her part better, perhaps, than others, and that her enemies ought not to expect her to be humiliated because she could play it no longer: "It is before God that I ought to feel humiliated," she said, "and I do."

After quitting France, where Louis XIV was then dying, and where the Duc d'Orléans, her declared enemy, was about to be master and Regent, she went to live in Rome, her old residence, the city of fallen grandeur and decent disgrace. From long habit, she set herself to govern the household of the King and Queen of England, in order to govern something. There she witnessed the arrival, overthrown in their turn, of more than one of those who had caused her downfall. She died in December, 1722, at more than eighty years of age.

The publication of official papers and the despatches of French ambassadors during the period of Mme. des

Ursins in Madrid (if that publication is ever made) can alone determine with precision the full importance and quality of her political action. As for her literary merit, I presume to say that Mme. des Ursins only needs less negligent editors to become one of our epistolary classics. Her letters are full of living pages, which give us not only the manners and morals of the Court of Spain, but those of French society towards the close of the reign of Louis XIV. No one really knows the Duchesse de Bourgogne, Mme. de Caylus, and many other persons of agreeable renown, until they see them daily passing in and out through this Correspondence. In spite of fortunate and choice exceptions, it is plain that the great century is becoming corrupt; the young women of that day are growing strange in manners and in morals; they are about to be the women of the Regency. They do not yet smoke, as they do to-day, but they take snuff. The pretty nose of Mme. de Caylus is daubed with tobacco. The Duchesse de Bourgogne sits up all night, sups, and, from the advice perpetually given to her, appears to have done all she could to kill herself. Mme. des Ursins, who thinks Mme. de Maintenon too severe on her young and charming relations, especially on Mme. de Noailles and Mme. de Caylus, exhorts her to surround herself with her nieces, who would brighten and rejuvenate her life. Whereupon Mme. de Maintenon, with her most piquant rigidity and rectitude replies—and it is clearly understood that

what follows is not intended to apply to Mme. de Caylus, nor to Mme. de Noailles:

“You lecture me on strangers and on my relations: I own to you, madame, that the women of these days are intolerable to me; their senseless and immodest clothing, their tobacco, their wine, their gluttony, their coarseness, their laziness—all that is so opposed to my taste that it seems to me, and with reason, that I cannot endure it. I like modest women, sober, gay, capable of serious things and playfulness; polite, jesting with jests that cover praise, whose hearts are kind, and their conversation lively and awake; yet simple-hearted enough to own to me that they recognise themselves in this portrait, which I have made without design, but which I think very just.”

It is indeed Mme. des Ursins whom the portrait resembles in her best moments; certainly in its principal features, and especially in that of “jesting that cover praise.” That is the method of charming most habitual to this choice spirit, just as her defect was a turn for too frequent irony and a satire that was carried too far.

I had the intention, in writing of Mme. des Ursins, to show some of the objections to political women, of whom she is a type, for all that such women can be that is distinguished, and at the same time incomplete, excitable, ostentatious, and vain. The subject studied, I have not the courage: she rendered real services and; we are glad to take her as we find her, able and skilful in difficult conjunctures. Still, in uniting these two personages of notable appearance before the world, Mme. des Ursins and Mme. de Maintenon, these two able women of the first order, may I be

permitted to recall, upon the background of an earlier period, behind and below them, the figure of a simple spectatress of the comedy of a Court; a person who had no genius of intrigue or of action, but a sound, equable good sense, gentle and delicate, a calm, safe judgment, the wise, sincere, and virtuous woman of those Court regions — Mme. de Motteville.

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